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## **Ocean advocates slam expanded US offshore drilling**

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By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON, Feb 11 (Reuters) - Ocean advocates from Hollywood to North Carolina's fragile beaches on Wednesday assailed a proposed expansion of offshore oil and gas drilling along the entire U.S. East Coast and four parts of California.

"Ecosystems are disrupted top to bottom by the short and long term effects of oil," Ted Danson, actor and founder of **American Oceans Campaign**, told the House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee.

"More oil spills mean less abundant oceans. More oil spills mean fewer wonderful, pristine beaches. More oil spills mean fewer jobs," he said.

Danson spoke one day after U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar extended the period for public comment on the Bush administration plan to expand offshore drilling, delaying any decision until September.

The Bush plan, drawn up in the last days of that Republican administration, had called for only 60 days of comment.

Representative Nick Rahall, a Democrat who chairs the committee, said there are more drilling rigs operating in the United States than in the rest of the world.

"Anyone who implies that we are not currently going after our own resources is being misleading, perhaps a little disingenuous," he said.

He cited a U.S. Energy Information Administration statement saying that any effect on oil and gas prices from increased offshore drilling would be insignificant, producing roughly 200,000 barrels in additional oil per day in 2030, which is 1 percent of current U.S. consumption.

"If we are going to start drilling in new areas offshore, we have to be aware what the trade-offs are, we have to ensure that it is being done in the best interests of the American people," Rahall said.

Philippe Cousteau, grandson of legendary ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau and a board member of Ocean Conservancy, agreed with Rahall.

"If there is to be new drilling, we must at the very least legislate to ensure the process of new drill siting and the conditions applied to exploration and production minimize their impacts," Cousteau said.

Carol McCormick, who heads North Carolina's Outer Banks Visitors Bureau, told the committee: "Oil and gas development threatens coastlines, harms ecosystems and directly impacts our tourism, fishing and real estate economies ... . The well-documented socioeconomic and environmental risks outweigh the rewards."

Representative Doc Hastings, a Republican from the coastal state of Washington, cited reports that OPEC leaders plans to cut production to push up oil prices.

"We must send a message to the world that America will produce its own energy and no longer allow ourselves to be held hostage by foreign government's to high energy prices," Hastings said.

A second hearing will feature state and local officials and a third will have comment from the oil and gas industry. (Editing by Xavier Briand)