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Interior Again Weighs Leasing Off Scenic Coast

By Dale Russakoff
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The Interior Department is again considering oil and gas development in four basins off the scenic Northern California coast, despite widespread political opposition that forced cancellation of leasing plans there last year.

The four basins, bordering lucrative salmon beds and picturesque shorelines, may be developed under Interior Secretary James G. Watt's five-year plan for oil and gas leasing in the outer continental shelf, Assistant Interior Secretary J. Robinson West told a House Appropriations subcommittee yesterday.

Interior officials said they will not know for several months whether the basins will be leased. But West told Rep. Les AuCoin (D-Ore.) at a hearing on the department's \$6 billion budget proposal that the areas will not necessarily be excluded from a 37-million-acre tract along the northern and central California coast now slated for development in 1983.

The uproar over leasing in the area reached a peak last summer, prompting California Republicans to write a letter to Watt and President Reagan, saying the issue could "severely hamper" the party in the 1982

elections. Soon afterward, Watt announced that he had removed the basins from the leasing schedule at least until 1983.

California Gov. Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr., who had heatedly opposed the leasing plan, called Watt's response "a retreat and a back-off from his misguided policy of desecrating the coast of California."

AuCoin sponsored a budget amendment last year to ban leasing in the basins, which passed the full House shortly before Watt canceled the lease plans. AuCoin expressed surprise yesterday that Interior is again considering the areas for leasing, and said he will reintroduce his amendment if the department offers the basins for development.

AuCoin read from reports that say the area is unstable—it is near the San Andreas fault—and could be prone to oil spills. He also quoted from a study that rates the basins as relatively low in oil potential.

The four basins range along the California coast from Eureka to Monterey and border the southern coast of AuCoin's Oregon.

Watt's accelerated plans for oil and gas leasing encompass 1 billion acres of the outer continental shelf, virtually the entire U.S. coastline.



JAMES G. WATT

... five-year-plan for continental shelf

Multimillion-acre tracts will be offered for leasing to the oil and gas industry, which will single out smaller sites for exploration, according to the plan. Interior will study those areas for environmental impacts before going forward with leasing. Watt is scheduled to present his final leasing plan to Congress in April, and it is not until then that the lengthy process of selecting development sites can begin. Some department officials said the industry is not likely to seek leases in the four California basins because of their reported low energy potential.