

Obama calls for cut in overseas U.S. oil imports

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U.S. President Barack Obama called Wednesday for a one-third reduction in overseas U.S. oil imports by 2025 in a speech in which he described Canada as one of several energy partners of his country.

Mr. Obama also emphasized the need for Americans to shift to cleaner fuel sources.

While the President already outlined the administration's oil objectives in his State of the Union address in February, his energy policy is taking on a new urgency as gas prices soar at the pumps amid a cascade of uprisings in the Arab world.

"We cannot keep going from shock to trance on the issue of energy security, rushing to propose action when gas prices rise, then hitting the snooze button when they fall again," Mr. Obama said at Georgetown University in the U.S. capital.

"It is time to do what we can to secure our energy future We will keep on being a victim to shifts in the oil market until we finally get serious about a long-term policy for secure, affordable energy."

Mr. Obama wants Americans to be using non-oil energy sources for 80 per cent of their electricity use by the year 2035.

In his speech, the President said he knows the country will still have to bring in foreign oil, giving a nod to America's friends in the Western Hemisphere, including Canada.

"I set this goal knowing that imported oil will remain an important part

of our energy portfolio for quite some time," he said.

"And when it comes to the oil we import from other nations, we can partner with neighbours like Canada, Mexico and Brazil, which recently discovered significant new oil reserves, and with whom we can share American technology and know-how."

Many Democrats concerned about climate change, however — most notably congressman Henry Waxman of California — have expressed serious misgivings about Alberta's oil sands. They've branded it "dirty oil" because mining the oil sands requires more energy than conventional oil operations, resulting in higher greenhouse gas emissions.

Environmental groups have warned that as the planet continues to heat up, it's foolhardy for the U.S. to continue being reliant on the world's most carbon-intensive fuel, even if it's coming from America's friendly neighbour to the north.

The State Department is currently deciding whether to approve Transcanada's Keystone XL pipeline, which will transport Alberta oil sands crude through the Midwest to Texas.

A decision on the pipeline isn't expected until the fall, but environmental groups and some Democrats have been urging Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to put the brakes on the pipeline, arguing vital aquifers in several agriculture-dependent states will be made vulnerable.

Republicans, on the other hand, are more eager to embrace Canadian oil. Mr. Obama's speech came on the eve of a hearing being held Thursday in the House of Representatives, now controlled by Republicans, entitled: "Rising Oil Prices and Dependence on Hostile Regimes: The Urgent Case for Canadian Oil."

Republicans have been assailing the Obama administration for months on energy, accusing officials of dawdling in issuing permits for new offshore drilling sites in the aftermath of last summer's devastating Gulf of Mexico oil spill and failing to lift a moratorium on new deep-water development quickly enough.

In his speech, Mr. Obama dismissed that criticism as political posturing.

Republicans were particularly irked, however, by Mr. Obama's remarks in Latin America last week that he wanted the U.S. to be a "major customer" for the mammoth new oil reserves Brazil recently discovered off its coast.

"The problem isn't that we need to look elsewhere for our energy," Mitch McConnell, Senate minority leader, said Wednesday.

"The problem is that Democrats don't want us to use the energy we have. It's enough to make you wonder whether anybody in the White House has driven by a gas station lately."

In his remarks, however, Mr. Obama stressed the need to tap "one critical, renewable resource ... American ingenuity."

"Meeting this new goal of cutting our oil dependence depends largely on two things: finding and producing more oil at home, and reducing our dependence on oil with cleaner alternative fuels and greater efficiency," he said.