



PSA-011-Seismic Program-Atlantic

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

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Seismic testing OK'd in parts of Atlantic

and Mary Troyan, Washington Bureau 2:33 p.m. EDT July 19, 2014



(Photo: AP)

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WASHINGTON – A controversial method for surveying oil and gas deposits under the ocean floor will be allowed along the Atlantic coastline, according to an announcement Friday by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

The federal agency said it will permit seismic testing in the mid- and south-Atlantic area, just south of New Jersey, **as long as surveyors take special precautions to protect marine mammals from the noisy blasts of compressed air used in the process.**

"The bureau's decision reflects a carefully analyzed and balanced approach that will allow us to increase our understanding of potential offshore resources while protecting



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the human, marine, and coastal environments," Acting BOEM Director Walter Cruickshank said.

But opponents, like Rep. Frank Pallone, D-N.J., quickly panned the decision, saying they didn't want to expose the Atlantic coast to a disaster like the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

"We have to put a stop to this approach before we experience a Deepwater Horizon-like disaster in the Atlantic Ocean," Pallone said. "We cannot put our ocean environment, beaches, marine resources, and coastal economies at risk."

It's been about 40 years since extensive geological and geophysical surveys were conducted in the Atlantic. The decision is a significant step toward opening the region to offshore oil and gas drilling.

Areas that could be opened to oil and gas exploration begin just south of New Jersey, with most of the interest coming from state officials in Virginia and the Carolinas, BOEM officials said Friday in a conference call with reporters. There are no permits yet for what are called geological and geophysical surveys, but the move toward setting up environmental rules brought renewed opposition from groups trying to block the use of high-powered air guns in [seismic studies](#).

The announcement came 24 hours after the same agency started its process for auctioning ocean leases for commercial wind power off New Jersey.

Seismic testing can be used to find and estimate the size of oil and gas deposits, survey the sea floor for the best place to build foundations for offshore wind energy turbines, or map sand deposits for use in coastal restoration projects.

In allowing the testing, the bureau also announced a rule-making framework to provide protections for whales and other marine mammals during oil and gas surveys off the East Coast.

According to an earlier environmental assessment by BOEM, seismic testing would affect "up to 138,000 marine mammals and disrupt feeding, calving, breeding and other vital activities more than 13 million times over the next eight years. At particular risk is the North Atlantic right whale, one of the most endangered whale species on the planet, of which only 500 remain," according to



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the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the national environmental groups opposing exploration.

The 138,000 is the estimated "take" as defined under federal law protecting whales and other marine mammals. But oil industry advocates contend critics overstate take as meaning physical injury, when it can also mean lesser effects such as disrupting feeding behaviors.

"Our government is jeopardizing the health of large numbers of dolphins and whales as well as commercial and recreational fisheries," said Claire Douglass, a campaign director for the environmental group Oceana, which last year started an effort to block seismic surveys.

Oceana points to incidents of mammal strandings in Namibia and Madagascar after seismic work, and studies from Australia and Norway that linked surveys to lower fish catches.

To limit the effects, the BOEM has prepared "a very strong suite of mitigation measures that we developed in consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service," said Cruickshank. "We are taking every step that we think is reasonable to take."

The measures include time and area closures of seismic work during migrations, such as the northern right whales' annual movements between New England and calving grounds off the Georgia coast. There will be heightened monitoring for animals, and keeping surveys distant from each other in time and areas, he said.

Early on, President Barack Obama's administration signaled an "all of the above" attitude toward developing new domestic energy sources, and wind and potential Atlantic petroleum development have been on the list. But the prospect of oil and gas drilling — even many miles from New Jersey waters — periodically excites opposition from the state's tourism and fishing industries as well as environmental groups, for fear of what a spill would do to beaches across the region.

"Atlantic coastal states have thrived for decades on clean ocean economies such as tourism and commercial and recreational fishing," said Cynthia A. Zipf, executive director of the Monmouth County-based Clean Ocean Action group, which has pressed to keep a decades-old drilling moratorium off the East Coast.



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"The New Jersey coastal (congressional) delegation in particular has stood firm in its resistance to offshore fossil fuel development due to the huge risks that oil spills pose to the marine environment. One spill could wipe out our entire coastal economy," Zipf said.

Another issue is the effect of air gun use on ocean life. Many times louder than a jet engine, the undersea blasts send out acoustic waves that penetrate the sea floor and generate cross-section images that help geologists prospect for oil and gas.

But some congressional Democrats and environmental groups say the bureau's proposed protections are not strong enough. They want more scientific analysis of how the loud airguns affect marine life.

"President Obama is bowing to pressure from Big Oil rather than listening to the thousands of voices calling on him to protect our natural resources and coastal economies," Douglass of Oceana said.

The trade association for seismic survey companies, however, warned that the protections required by BOEM would be too restrictive.

"These mitigation measures will impose serious burdens on industry, likely discourage exploration of the Atlantic, and will result in no benefits to protected species," said Robert Hobbs, chairman of the International Association of Geophysical Contractors. "This approach is contrary to both the best available scientific information and applicable law."

The Interior Department is working on a plan to cover oil and gas leasing activity from 2017-2022, and there is a push on Capitol Hill to add the Atlantic to the schedule.

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