

Coastal Stakeholders Oppose Expanding Offshore Oil & Gas Drilling and Exploration, including Seismic Airgun Blasting

East Coast communities strongly oppose offshore oil and gas drilling and exploration, including seismic airgun blasting—an extremely loud and dangerous process used to search for oil and gas deposits deep below the ocean’s surface—because these activities threaten their economic well-being and quality of life. Along the Atlantic coast, communities rely on healthy ocean ecosystems to support jobs in fishing, recreation and tourism.

Introduction

In April 2017, President Trump signed an [executive order](#) aimed at expanding offshore drilling and exploration.¹ Specifically, the order calls for a review of the 2017-2022 Five Year Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program that was finalized under the previous administration. The order puts all U.S. waters back under consideration for offshore drilling, and directs federal agencies to fast-track the permitting process for seismic airgun blasting in the Atlantic Ocean. Following the directive, the Department of the Interior reversed its prior decision to deny seismic airgun blasting permits off the East Coast, and is now considering issuing those permits imminently. Concurrently, some Members of Congress are pushing legislation to open up our coasts to expanded offshore drilling.

In 2014, the previous administration proposed opening much of the mid- and south Atlantic Ocean to offshore drilling, including the coasts of Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. It was ultimately decided to remove the Atlantic coast from consideration for offshore drilling and exploration, due to opposition from East Coast municipalities, elected officials, business and fishing interests, as well as conflicts with long-standing ocean uses like Department of Defense and NASA activities.

The Opposition

As of August 2017, more than [130](#) East Coast municipalities and 1,200 local, state and federal elected officials have formally opposed offshore drilling and/or seismic airgun blasting. Numerous fishing and tourism interests, including local chambers of commerce, tourism and restaurant associations, and an alliance representing over 41,000 businesses and 500,000 fishing families from Florida to Maine, have also publically opposed oil exploration and/or development in the Atlantic.

Additionally, the South, Mid-Atlantic, and New England Fishery Management Councils have all expressed concerns about the risks posed by seismic surveys and oil and gas development to managed resources, fisheries and coastal communities. NASA, the Department of Defense, and the Florida Defense Support Task Force have also expressed concerns about offshore oil and gas development threatening their ability to perform critical activities.²

“It is hard to recall a grassroots effort that has advanced a cause so rapidly.”
[-Post & Courier](#)

Threats from Offshore Drilling and Seismic Airgun Blasting

This strong opposition has emerged because offshore drilling and exploration could devastate local and regional economies and significantly harm marine life, destroying the very fabric of coastal communities:

- Oil and gas drilling and exploration off the East Coast could jeopardize the nearly 1.4 million jobs and over \$95 billion in annual gross domestic product supported by healthy Atlantic ocean ecosystems, mainly through fishing, tourism and recreation.³ The consistent and long-term economic benefits generated from proven coastal industries far outweigh any potential jobs or short-term gains that offshore drilling could provide.
- Offshore drilling could result in the industrialization of coastal communities and a horizon scattered with oil rigs. Oil and gas drilling could also expose the entire Atlantic seaboard to pollution from chronic leaks and everyday spills, as well as the looming risk of another BP *Deepwater Horizon*-like disaster.
- Oil and gas activities threaten fish and marine wildlife that rely on clean water and healthy coastlines to survive. Seismic airgun blasting is harmful to marine life—airgun blasts create one of the loudest manmade sounds in the ocean and can be heard up to 2,500 miles from the source, approximately the distance from New York City to Los Angeles.⁴ These loud blasts can impact fish, shellfish and other invertebrates, whales, and sea turtles by changing behaviors necessary for their survival.⁵ The federal government estimates that proposed surveys in the Atlantic could injure as many as 138,000 marine mammals while disturbing the vital activities of millions more.⁶
- Even the exploration process requires risky drilling before oil extraction begins. After seismic airgun blasting, companies must drill exploratory wells to definitively confirm the presence of subsea oil and gas deposits. In fact, this was the intent of the *BP Deepwater Horizon* rig when the disaster occurred in 2010.⁷

The Trump Administration's actions to expand offshore drilling and seismic airgun blasting to the Atlantic ignore mounting opposition, threats to coastal economies, danger to marine life and past disasters. Pursuing offshore drilling only benefits oil companies, while putting the entire Atlantic coast and the livelihoods of millions of Americans at risk.

¹ The White House (2017) Presidential Executive Order Implementing and America-First Offshore Energy Strategy. In: *Office of the Press Secretary*. Available: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/28/presidential-executive-order-implementing-america-first-offshore-energy>. Accessed June 16, 2017.

² Oceana (no date) Grassroots Opposition to Atlantic Drilling and Seismic Airgun Blasting. In: *Climate and Energy*. Available: <http://usa.oceana.org/climate-and-energy/grassroots-opposition-atlantic-drilling-and-seismic-airgun-blasting>. Accessed June 16, 2017.

³ NOAA (2014) Economics: National Ocean Watch (ENOW) Explorer. In: *Office for Coastal Management*. Available: <https://coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/tools/enow.html>. Accessed June 16, 2017.

⁴ Nieuwkirk S, Mellinger D, Moore S, *et al.* (2012) Sounds from airguns and fins whales recorded in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, 1999-2009. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 131(2): 1102-1112.

⁵ McCauley R, Fewtrell J, Duncan A, *et al.* (2000) Marine seismic surveys: Analysis and propagation of air-gun signals; and effects of air-gun exposure on humpback whales, sea turtles, fishes and squid. Western Australia: Curtin University of Technology.

⁶ BOEM (2012) Atlantic OCS Proposed Geological and Geophysical Activities Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Planning Areas Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. In: *Gulf of Mexico OCS Region*. Available: <https://www.boem.gov/BOEM-Newsroom/Library/Publications/2012/BOEM-2012-005-vol1-pdf.aspx>. Accessed June 16, 2017.

⁷ National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling (2011) Report to the President: Deep Water – The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling. In: *Government Publishing Office*. Available: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-OILCOMMISSION/pdf/GPO-OILCOMMISSION.pdf>. Accessed: June 16, 2017.