



Fishing, Seismic Testing, and Offshore Drilling

In March 2016, the Obama Administration removed the Atlantic lease sale from the 2017-2022 plan for offshore oil and gas leasing, due to intense opposition from coastal communities, fishing interests, the Department of Defense, and NASA. However, offshore drilling supporters in Congress continue to push legislation to require drilling in the Atlantic.

Despite the decision to protect the Atlantic from leasing, the federal government is reviewing applications for companies to use seismic airguns to search for oil and gas deposits deep below the ocean floor. This process is proceeding on a separate track from the offshore oil and gas leasing plan. In 2014 the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) issued a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) and Record of Decision to allow geological and geophysical (G&G) activities—including seismic airgun blasting—to proceed in the Atlantic once various additional environmental reviews were completed. Now, BOEM is moving toward issuing permits for G&G companies to conduct seismic airgun blasting in an area twice the size of California, stretching from Delaware to Florida.¹ These activities could harm tens of thousands of marine mammals² and displace fish.³

As ocean stakeholders, fishermen are uniquely reliant upon and knowledgeable about healthy ocean ecosystems. Commercial and recreational fishermen recognize the serious risks posed by seismic testing and offshore drilling. For example, there is evidence that **seismic airguns can dramatically decrease catch rates of commercial fish species by about 50 percent on average over thousands of square miles, with even greater reductions in areas close to the airguns.**⁴

Along with two of the Regional Fishery Management Councils that regulate fishing activities—the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils—fishermen have added their voices to the opposition to oil and gas activities in the Atlantic. The two Councils manage many of the fisheries in the proposed area for seismic blasting and oil and gas leasing. The fishery management councils are composed of stakeholders, including commercial and recreational industry and government representatives. The following statements from the Fishery Management Councils, fisheries associations, and individual fishermen reflect this opposition and the industry's deep concerns about offshore oil and gas exploration and development.

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

- “The Council is committed to the effective stewardship of the marine fisheries and associated habitats in the Mid-Atlantic region. The environmental risks associated with **offshore oil development and operations are not consistent with the Council’s vision** for healthy and productive marine ecosystems supporting thriving, sustainable marine fisheries.”⁵
- “After many years of working to rebuild Mid-Atlantic fisheries to sustainable levels, **the potential negative impacts of G&G activities on these rebuilt resources are extremely troubling.**”⁶

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. (Mar. 7, 2014). Atlantic OCS Proposed Geological and Geophysical Activities, Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Planning Areas, Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. Retrieved from <http://www.boem.gov/BOEM-2014-001-v1/>.

² BOEM. (2012). Atlantic OCS Proposed Geological and Geophysical Activities Mid and South Atlantic Planning Areas Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (DPEIS). Retrieved from <http://www.boem.gov/BOEM-Newsroom/Library/Publications/2012/BOEM-2012-005-vol1-pdf.aspx>.

³ Slotte, A., Hansen, K., Dalen, J., & Ona, E. (2004). Acoustic mapping of pelagic fish distribution and abundance in relation to a seismic shooting area off the Norwegian west coast. *Fisheries Research*, 67(2), 143-150. doi: 10.1016/j.fishres.2003.09.046

⁴ A. Engås et al., *Effects of Seismic Shooting on Local Abundance and Catch Rates of Cod (Gadus Morhua) and Haddock (Melanogrammus Aeglefinus)*, 53 Canadian J. Fisheries & Aquatic Sciences 2238-49 (1996).

⁵ Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, “[Council Policy on Offshore Oil](#)”, December 2015.

⁶ Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, [Letter to Gary D. Goeke \(BOEM\)](#), May 2, 2014.



- “The Council recognizes the importance of energy exploration to U.S. economic security, but the [G&G] activities described in the Final PEIS have the potential to contravene the Council's efforts to conserve and manage living marine resources and habitat.”⁷
- “...given the existing value of marine resources to the region and the nation, from the Council's perspective the potential benefits do not appear to outweigh the risks of initiating the proposed G&G activities.”⁸

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

- *Regarding offshore drilling:*
 - “The SAFMC finds...that **oil or gas drilling for exploration or development on or closely associated with EFH [Essential Fish Habitat]...be prohibited.**”⁹
 - “Certain offshore, nearshore, and riverine habitats are particularly important to the long-term viability of commercial and recreational fisheries under SAFMC management, and potentially threatened by oil, gas, wind and other energy exploration and development activities.”¹⁰
- *Regarding seismic testing:*
 - “...seismic testing will directly impact benthic ecosystems, essential fish habitat, managed species, and the fisheries which depend on them. **Therefore, the Council recommends that seismic surveys not be conducted in areas that will impact EFH [Essential Fish Habitat]...**”¹¹
 - “**Multi-million dollar recreational and commercial fisheries in our region may potentially be affected by seismic testing.**”¹²

Fishing Associations

Southeastern Fisheries Association: “On behalf of the seafood industry represented by our 63 year old fisheries association, we implore you to prevent the seismic testing slated for the east coast of Florida. There is no upside for injuring Right whales and dolphins or putting our white beaches and tourism industry in jeopardy.”¹³

The Billfish Foundation: “Before moving further, additional programmatic analysis is needed to reduce the potentially negative impacts [of G&G activities] on important marine ecosystems as well as economically important activities such as recreational fishing.”¹⁴

International Game Fish Association: “The proposed G&G activities will have significant environmental impacts but the PEIS fails to provide specific detail on how it will affect marine mammals, fish and benthic communities...As such, we feel that there is simply too much at risk in going forward with seismic testing.”¹⁵

Roy Diehl, Director, Belford Seafood Cooperative; Member, Board of Directors, Garden State Seafood Association: “If there is any kind of spill [off the South Atlantic] it'll carry it up here. We're against it.”¹⁶

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, “[Policies for the Protection and Restoration of Essential Fish Habitats from Energy Exploration, Development Transportation and Hydropower Re-Licensing](#)”, June 2005.

¹⁰South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, “[Policy for the Protection and Restoration of Essential Fish Habitats from Energy Exploration and Development Activities](#)”, December 14, 2015.

¹¹The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, [Letter to Gary D. Goeke \(BOEM\)](#), April 30, 2015.

¹²Ibid.

¹³The Southeastern Fisheries Association, [Letter to President Obama](#), December 3, 2014.

¹⁴The Billfish Foundation, [Letter to Gary D. Goeke \(BOEM\)](#), May 7, 2014.

¹⁵The International Game Fish Association, [Letter to Gary D. Goeke \(BOEM\)](#), May 1, 2014.

¹⁶Ibid.