United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 9, 2015

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Jewell,

The Draft Proposed Program governing oil and gas leasing on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) released recently by the Interior Department would threaten our states by opening the Atlantic to offshore drilling in 2021. As you finalize the Five-Year Program for offshore drilling on the OCS, we urge you to maintain the longstanding protections for our states along the East Coast by removing any proposed offshore oil and gas leasing in the Atlantic Ocean.

The Draft Proposed Program proposes holding a lease sale off the coasts of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. However, as we saw with the BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, offshore oil spills can impact coastlines and the environment hundreds of miles from where the drilling occurred. The independent, bipartisan National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling noted in its final report that "more than 650 miles of Gulf coastal habitats…were oiled" during the BP spill.[1] The Gulf Coast Incident Management Team found that more than 1,100 miles of coastline were oiled during the spill.[2] Oil from the BP spill off the coast of Louisiana reached the coastlines of all five Gulf Coast states – Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas.

Moreover, while the draft plan proposes leasing at least 50 miles off the East Coast, the Macondo well that led to the BP spill was located 49 miles off of Louisiana, demonstrating that no buffer from the coastline is sufficient to prevent the devastating impacts of a spill. As we saw just a few short years ago, offshore oil spills do not respect artificial state boundaries and a spill in the Atlantic could affect our states.

It is also completely unnecessary to contemplate opening the East Coast to drilling when the oil and gas industry is currently sitting on tens of millions of acres of public land offshore on which it is not yet producing oil. The oil industry has roughly 24 million acres of offshore public land under lease in the Gulf of Mexico on which it is not producing oil. Indeed, 83 percent of all offshore areas under lease in the Gulf are not yet producing. In the FY2016 budget, the administration has once again proposed a number of changes to ensure that oil companies are

[1] Report to the President, National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling. January 2011. Available at: http://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/oilspill/20121211005728/http:/www.oilspillcommission.gov/sites/default/files/documents/DEEPWATER_ReporttothePresident_FINAL.pdf

[2] Gulf Coast Incident Management Team, December 2010. Available at: http://www.restorethegulf.gov/release/2014/01/16/gcimt-december-executive-summary-0

diligently developing the leases they already hold on public lands. When oil companies are currently warehousing leases in the Gulf that comprise an area nearly the size of Kentucky, we should first ensure that they are taking full advantage of the areas that are already open before seeking to open new areas.

The Interior Department has also not yet even finished its permit application review process for potential seismic testing in the Atlantic. While we believe that this proposed offshore seismic testing is extremely harmful to marine life and the environment and we strongly oppose seismic testing in the Atlantic, it is premature and even more dangerous to propose moving forward with leasing off the East Coast when DOI has not even completed this process and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is still reviewing the severity of the adverse impacts associated with seismic testing. In light of that, and with all of the serious known negative impacts associated with offshore drilling, there is simply no justification for opening up the Atlantic.

Offshore drilling anywhere in the Atlantic has the potential to adversely impact our states' fishing, tourism and recreation industries, our coastlines and our environment. These industries that rely on a healthy coastal ecosystem generate billions of dollars a year in economic activity for our states and would be severely threatened by offshore drilling anywhere in the Atlantic. As you finalize the 2017-2022 Five-Year OCS Drilling Program we urge you to protect our states' economies and environment by eliminating any proposed oil and gas leasing offshore in the Atlantic.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

Barbara A. Mikulski
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Kirsten E. Gillibrand
United States Senator

Bill Nelson
United States Senator