



Concerned about seismic testing? Tell NOAA

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Environmental groups start organizing opposition to the Trump Administration's efforts to streamline seismic testing.

WILMINGTON – Are you ready to see baby blue Don't Drill NC signs across the region again?

Tuesday night, the N.C. Coastal Federation, Oceana, Cape Fear Sierra Club and the Cape Fear Surfrider Foundation held an organizational meeting at New Hanover County's Northeast Regional Library to take the first steps toward the opposition of President Donald Trump's efforts to open the Atlantic coast from Delaware to Florida to seismic testing and, potentially, offshore drilling.

And they gave away about 100 of those signs.

"We want you to stand as an unaffiliated group of citizens that have just had enough, you've had enough with the attack on your coast," said Randy Sturgill, an Oceana organizer who lives in Southport.

Tuesday's meeting came a day after the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Fisheries division announced the opening of a 30-day public comment period on five permits requesting to incidentally impact marine mammals during seismic testing. Scientists have expressed concerns about the impact the loud, intermittent blasts from seismic testing can have on marine mammals' delivery capabilities and patterns.

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“The animal may swim farther out of the way to distance itself from the sound source than usual. It may change its diving or feeding patterns with the (sound) source is in the vicinity,” Donna Wieting, the director of NOAA’s Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, said on a Monday conference call.

NOAA’s process includes observers on board each seismic vessel, acoustic monitoring to help detect mammals that can’t be seen from the surface and gradual “ramping up” of acoustic testing so affected mammals can flee the area. Once an authorization is issued, it is eligible for one year.

“What they’re requesting from us is the authorization to harass marine mammals ... as they’re doing this activity,” Jolie Harrison, the chief of NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resource’s Permits and Conservation Division, said on Monday’s call.

During previous efforts to review offshore drilling and seismic testing, communities up and down the Atlantic coast made their opposition known, with more than 125 governments -- including 32 in North Carolina -- passing resolutions opposing either drilling, testing or both. Often, the reasons included potential threats to wildlife or the area’s tourism-heavy economy. Brunswick and Carteret counties stood alone in passing resolutions in favor of offshore exploration.

The only elected official at Tuesday’s meeting was New Hanover County Commissioner Rob Zapple.

Ultimately, the Obama Administration decided to leave the Atlantic Coast out of the offshore exploration plan for 2017-22, a move that President Donald Trump signaled his intention to walk back with his late-April executive order, in which he called for streamlined seismic testing and the prioritization of energy exploration and production.

The Trump order also did not include a barrier of 50 miles off the coast that Obama’s review had, a step that further concerns environmentalists but is seen by industry sources as potentially benefiting North Carolina. Decades-old seismic tests show the state’s greatest resource reserves could from the coast.

Early last month, Walter Cruickshank, the acting director of the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, asked the Interior Board of Land Appeals to Cruickshank wrote that the Obama Administration “underestimated” the importance of updating seismic information and said BOEM research indicated seismic surveys won’t have significant impacts on marine mammals.

Mike Giles, a coastal advocate for the N.C. Coastal Federation, told those assembled Tuesday they need to start to push back against the Trump Administration’s efforts.

“It’s up to us to take this fight to the streets,” he said. “It’s up to us to take this fight to Washington, D.C., it’s up to us to take the fight to Raleigh, North Carolina.”

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