January 23, 2026

Dear Secretary Burgum:

As over 100 scientists, we write in response to the Department of Interior's draft proposed National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program (DPP). We are united in our concern about the DPP's impact on fisheries, marine life, and the climate. New offshore drilling threatens our oceans and coastal communities with oil spills and chronic pollution, while resulting emissions will worsen climate change. Onshore oil refining threatens local community health. While we welcome the exclusion of the Atlantic and Washington/Oregon planning areas from the Draft Proposed Program, we oppose expanded leasing anywhere on the Outer Continental Shelf, including off California, the Gulf of Mexico, and Alaska. We urge you to release a program with no scheduled lease sales beyond those required by Congress.

Our oceans and communities should be protected from more oil spill disasters.

Every oil spill begins with a lease sale, and we have witnessed the devastating effects of offshore drilling. The 2010 BP *Deepwater Horizon* explosion killed 11 workers and caused the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history, releasing 134 million gallons of oil over 87 days, contaminating 1,300 miles of shoreline, and killing thousands of animals.[1] Cleanup workers were exposed to crude oil and toxic dispersants,[2] which have been linked to long-term endocrine, respiratory, and cardiovascular impacts.[3,4] Despite these harms, the DPP seeks to expand offshore drilling.

The Gulf of Mexico is home to endangered whales, sea turtles, and other species. Rice's whales, among the world's most endangered whales, lost about 22% of their population from *Deepwater Horizon*, and oil industry activity remains a primary threat to their precarious survival.[5] Leatherback sea turtles also rely on Gulf habitat that overlaps dense offshore infrastructure.[6] Shallow-water mangroves, seagrasses, oyster reefs, and salt marshes support key fisheries. In deeper waters where drilling is proposed, an oil spill could inflict long-lasting harm on deep-sea species, including slow-growing corals still struggling to recover from *Deepwater Horizon*.

Alaska's waters tell a similar story of long-lasting harm. The 1989 Exxon *Valdez* tanker crash released nearly 11 million gallons of oil across a remote and biologically rich ecosystem.[7] The spill killed an estimated 250,000 seabirds,[8] and some orca and seabird populations have never recovered.[9] Subsurface oil still persists today.[9] Alaska's waters support migration routes and feeding and breeding areas for many marine species. The oil industry is not prepared to operate safely in the remote, icy, and sensitive Arctic, where no proven method exists to contain or clean a major spill. Limited response capacity and a lack of infrastructure heighten these risks.

California has also suffered repeated oil spill disasters. The 1969 Santa Barbara and 2015 Refugio Beach spills together impacted over 90 miles of coastline and 935 square miles of ocean, an area almost twice the size of Los Angeles. The Pacific supports globally important migratory marine wildlife such as sharks, dolphins, sea turtles, and fish. The region includes critical habitat

for humpback whales, Southern Resident killer whales, Pacific leatherback sea turtles, southern green sturgeon, and black abalone, along with sensitive coral and sponge communities.[10]

These repeated spills show the ongoing risks to coastal communities and ecosystems. Expanding the footprint of offshore drilling would only increase those risks. Where they drill, they spill.

Offshore oil and gas drilling causes chronic pollution.

Expanding offshore oil and gas infrastructure would increase toxic pollution, endangering coastal and marine ecosystems. Despite industry claims that oil spills are rare, offshore drilling consistently proves to be dirty. Between 2010 and 2022, more than 7,300 oil spills occurred in federal waters, an average of over one spill every day.[11] Offshore drilling pollutes air, water, and seabed environments by routinely discharging produced water, drilling muds, and drill cuttings into the ocean,[12] harming life near the ocean floor.[13]

Pollution continues after extraction, throughout every step of the fossil fuel lifecycle. Refining releases hazardous pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and particulate solids. This process also produces thermal pollution that disrupts aquatic ecosystems.[14] In addition, removing impurities like helium, carbon dioxide, hydrocarbons, and toxic hydrogen sulfide from gas can discharge harmful pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, the precursor to acid rain.[15] Oil refineries present major health hazards for marine environments and fenceline communities.

Communities in the Gulf of Mexico already bear the burden of coastal industrialization from offshore drilling. Nearly half of U.S. petroleum refining capacity is located on the Gulf Coast,[16] where pollution from oil and gas facilities often disproportionately impacts communities of color.[17] New oil infrastructure could lead to more waste and pollution from offshore drilling.

Seismic airgun blasting threatens marine wildlife and fisheries.

Many marine species rely on sound as their primary tool to communicate, navigate, avoid predators, locate food, and find mates. Seismic airgun surveys—used to locate potential undersea oil and gas deposits—create one of the loudest manmade sounds in the ocean.[18] These blasts can be heard underwater nearly 2,500 miles from the source,[19] disrupting essential behaviors and harming or killing marine life ranging from zooplankton to whales.[20] Fisheries also suffer: studies show that catch rates decline in areas exposed to seismic blasting.[21–23]

Whale populations are particularly susceptible to harm from seismic blasts. Seismic airgun noise can cause hearing injury, behavioral changes, chronic stress, and compromised immunity.[24] Whales exposed to this extremely loud noise may change their breathing patterns, avoid areas with seismic blasting, or stop vocalizing, interfering with communication between mothers and calves, or between potential mates.[25–27] Such disruptions further endanger already vulnerable populations. Many whale populations living in areas proposed in this plan remain threatened with extinction, including the critically endangered Rice's whale in the Gulf of Mexico,[5] the endangered beluga whale in Cook Inlet,[28] and the Southern Resident killer whale in the Pacific.[29]

Offshore drilling exacerbates climate change.

Burning fossil fuels is the leading cause of climate change[30] and further development of offshore oil and gas will only intensify the problem. Oil and gas combustion releases greenhouse gases that contribute to rising global temperatures and a changing global climate. Elevated greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere intensify climate-related impacts such as ocean warming, sea level rise, stronger storms, droughts, wildfires, and ocean acidification, all of which threaten the health and welfare of communities across the United States.[31]

A rapid phase-down of fossil fuels is essential to avoiding the worst climate impacts. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, swift and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions would perceptibly slow planet warming within approximately two decades.[32] We can fight the climate crisis and safeguard our economies by advancing clean energy and protecting our coasts from offshore drilling. There are also health benefits to reducing fossil fuel production: replacing fossil fuels with renewables can reduce incidences of respiratory illness, heart disease, and premature deaths linked to air pollution.[33] Rather than pursuing harmful new offshore oil leasing, the U.S. should expand renewable energy to fuel our economy.

The science is clear: to protect our health, communities, and ocean environment we must stop the expansion of offshore oil and gas drilling. Releasing a program with no scheduled offshore oil and gas lease sales beyond those required by Congress will protect coastal communities from devastating pollution, support healthy marine ecosystems, and encourage a clean energy future. The time for action is now.

Sincerely,

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