Aquarium Conservation Partnership

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

Re: Proposed 11th National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program

Dear Secretary Burgum,

As 21 of the nation's leading aquariums and zoos, we are committed to our nation's ocean and freshwater heritage of clean and healthy waters and urge you not to open areas of U.S. offshore waters to new oil and gas exploration and drilling as proposed in the 11th National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Proposed Program Draft. As nonpartisan, science-based institutions we are extremely concerned that this proposed plan specifically targets states and coastlines where our facilities manage and maintain frontline work that ranges from animal stranding and rescue, disaster readiness and response, and coastline restoration and resilience. We implore the administration to pause this planning process and engage our organizations to help inform a 5-year plan that better reflects coastal community needs.

Many of our aquariums and zoos are located in coastal states and serve as economic anchors, and we understand that a healthy ocean and coastal environments are crucial for tourism and recreation, attracting millions of visitors, bringing in billions of dollars per year, and supporting over a million jobs. For coastal communities, safeguarding well-being and tourism-based economies requires a holistic approach that protects natural habitats and wildlife. Healthy marine and coastal ecosystems, such as salt marshes and coral reefs, provide essential services like storm protection, water filtration, and fishery habitats. We have a vested interest in ensuring the best safeguards possible are in place to protect the well-being of our coastal communities, as well as the wildlife and habitats on which our tourism-based economies depend.

Expanded oil and gas exploration and drilling poses an unnecessary and unacceptable risk to our coastal communities and our nation's blue economy while exposing large amounts of the United States, where over 40 percent of our population lives and works to these risks. The impact of the oil disasters in the Gulf region is still decades away from a complete recovery from the BP/Deepwater Horizon blowout that discharged over 200 million gallons of oil. This spill alone covered over 1,000 miles of shoreline and continues to have grievous effects on seabirds, sea turtles, corals, tuna, and dolphins, as well as thousands of coastal residents and ocean-dependent businesses.

We have seen firsthand the devastating effects offshore drilling has on the health and safety of coastal communities. From toxic air pollution to contaminated water and wildlife to fueling extreme weather events, offshore drilling poses unnecessary and unacceptable risks. As aquariums and zoos we serve as places to understand and protect living treasures, including endangered species like the North Atlantic right whale, Southern Resident Orcas, Kemp's ridley's sea turtle and our beautiful coral reefs, and we aim to inspire a sense of responsibility and action to protect marine environments. We urge you to do more to include the voices of those most impacted, including coastal residents and businesses like ours, in the development of this Draft Proposed Program.

We, the undersigned, urge you not to open offshore areas to new oil and gas drilling. Thank you for taking our comments into consideration.

Sincerely,

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Aquarium of Niagara

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