



OFFSHORE SEISMIC AIR GUN BLASTING: UNNECESSARY AND HARMFUL

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STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

In March 2016, the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) removed the Atlantic from its 2017-2022 leasing program for offshore oil and gas. One of the reasons for this removal was the loud and widespread opposition from local communities against offshore drilling. In Virginia, those voices of opposition included the Virginia Beach Restaurant Association and Hotel Association, the Virginia Beach Resort Advisory Commission, the Garden Club of Virginia, Eastern Shore county boards of supervisors, and the state level Virginia Restaurant, Lodging & Travel Association, as well as civic organizations such as the Sandbridge Civic League.

Another reason for the removal of the Atlantic was conflicts with existing uses of the ocean that are central to Virginia's economy. A 2015 Department of Defense Report objected that oil and gas activities in the Atlantic, and especially off Virginia, would be incompatible with military training and readiness. In addition, oil and gas activities, including the presence of ships, aircraft, or extraction platforms, fixed or moveable, are likely to conflict with operations at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility off the coast of Virginia - NASA's only rocket launch range. Finally, regional fishing organizations such as the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the Southeastern Fisheries Association, and the International Game Fish Association voiced their concerns about the plan to open up the southeast coast to offshore development.

Despite the removal of the Atlantic from the current offshore drilling program, BOEM is still considering permits to allow seismic air gun blasting in an area that spans from Delaware to Florida. There are currently eight companies with permits pending review interested in exploring for oil and gas locked deep in the Atlantic Ocean. But the only reason to do seismic blasting is to drill. Concerns from the military, fishing industry, tourism, and local communities will not go away in the next five-year plan; therefore, there is no reason to continue down that path.

In addition, the immediate impact of seismic blasting off Virginia, including within just three miles of the Chesapeake Bay, will cause significant and unnecessary harm to fish and marine life. The noise from seismic airgun blasting is so loud that it can be heard up to 2,500 miles from the source, which is akin to the distance between Washington, D.C. and Las Vegas. A significant body of peer-reviewed science indicates that seismic airgun blasts can result in displacement of fish, cause catch rates of some commercial fish species to decline, and negatively impact other marine species of economic value, like oysters and scallops. Also of concern is the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale: only about 400 individuals remain and the current seismic airgun blasting proposal lies directly within their only known calving grounds – federally protected as critical habitat – and migratory pathway mothers and calves must take to get these waters.

Seismic blasting for oil and gas is extremely intense as these air gun blasts must penetrate deep beneath the ocean floor to locate deposits. It is distinct from the type of seismic exploration necessary to support offshore wind development, which employs different technologies, is conducted in small limited areas, and needs only to penetrate a few yards deep into the seabed; thus, impacts to the environment from seismic exploration for wind turbines are extremely minimal compared to seismic airgun blasting to search for oil and gas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governor McAuliffe and other elected officials should formally request that the Obama administration permanently suspend all Atlantic seismic exploration in order to protect Virginia's coastal economies, communities, and important habitat.