

Testimony of Michael Messmer
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before the
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 6, 2020

Good morning. Thank you, Chair McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify as a public witness. My name is Michael Messmer and I am the Ocean Advocate on Oceana's Offshore Drilling Campaign. Oceana is the largest international advocacy organization devoted solely to ocean conservation. I am here to speak in opposition to expanded offshore oil and gas drilling, and specifically in opposition to the 2019-2024 [five-year program](#) for offshore oil and gas leasing that the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) is currently developing.

Oceana thanks the Committee and Members for including provisions in the FY2020 Interior-Environment Appropriations bill to restrict funding for offshore oil and gas leasing in the Atlantic Ocean, Pacific Ocean, and eastern Gulf of Mexico. Blocking funding for such leasing activities would effectively ensure a one-year moratorium on offshore drilling for those areas. There is longstanding precedent for this, as Congress – for nearly three decades – heeded concerns from the communities it represents and restricted spending on offshore federal oil and gas leasing and drilling activities via the appropriations process. We ask the Committee to make it a priority to include these offshore drilling moratoria again as you craft the FY2021 bill, and that the House insist upon the retention of such restrictions in any negotiations with the Senate.

The five-year program governs when and where BOEM can offer offshore drilling leases to the oil and gas industry. In January 2018, the Trump administration released its 2019-2024 Draft Proposed Program. As it stands, this proposal would radically expand future oil and gas leasing to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans, as well as off Florida's Gulf Coast. The draft plan proposes the largest number of potential offshore leases ever offered by any president – 47 lease sales – and proposes opening more than 90 percent of the acreage of the entire Outer Continental Shelf.

Reinstating offshore drilling moratoria through the appropriations process would prevent BOEM from leasing specific areas that Congress wishes to protect from future offshore drilling. Without moratoria provisions, Congress relinquishes its power to influence the future of offshore drilling to the executive branch.

Offshore drilling threatens the continued prosperity of coastal communities and states whose economies are directly tied to clean, oil-free shorelines and waters. The administration's proposal to expand oil and gas activities to nearly all federal ocean waters poses a real threat to every business and industry that relies on a healthy marine environment to thrive. Oceana found that tourism, fishing, and recreation — all major drivers of coastal economies — in the Atlantic, Pacific, and eastern Gulf of Mexico support over 2.6 million American jobs and generate roughly \$180 billion in GDP each year. If fisheries are properly managed and coastlines are continuously

protected, these jobs can be sustained for generations to come. This stands in stark contrast to offshore drilling for oil and gas, which produces finite resources. When the oil and gas run out, so will the jobs. Coastal communities want a reliable source of revenue – not more dirty drilling and dangerous seismic airgun blasting for oil and gas. In fact, as of today, opposition and concern over offshore drilling activities has been expressed by:

- Every East and West Coast governor;
- More than 380 municipalities;
- Over 2,300 local, state, and federal elected officials, including Democrats and Republicans;
- Alliances representing over 50,000 businesses and more than 500,000 fishing families;
- The Department of Defense, the Air Force, NASA, and the Florida Defense Support Task Force;
- The fishery management councils for New England, the South Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic, and Pacific regions; and
- Numerous commercial and recreational fishing interests such as Southeastern Fisheries Association, Snook and Gamefish Foundation, Fisheries Survival Fund, Southern Shrimp Alliance, North Atlantic Marine Alliance, Billfish Foundation, and International Game Fish Association.¹

Proponents of offshore drilling often fail to mention that developing oil and gas in new areas would require construction and development along much of the coast. Adding large-scale refineries, platforms, offshore and onshore pipelines, and other support infrastructure would drastically transform the character of coastal towns. Heavy industrialization of many coastlines is also likely to harm nearby resources and ecosystems.

In addition to permanently altering the landscape of many towns up and down the East and West Coasts, offshore drilling is a dirty investment with long-term consequences for the environment. Efforts to pursue offshore oil have consistently resulted in spills that are incredibly toxic to living organisms, both physically and biochemically.² Large-scale catastrophes such as BP's *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in 2010, highlight how a single accident can cause enormous and lasting consequences. The *Deepwater Horizon* tragedy killed 11 rig workers, spilled more than 200 million gallons of oil, fouled thousands of miles of coastline, endangered public health, and killed thousands of birds, dolphins, and fish.³ Seaside communities on the Gulf are still

¹ Oceana, *Grassroots Opposition to Offshore Drilling and Exploration in the Atlantic and Eastern Gulf of Mexico*, <http://usa.oceana.org/climate-and-energy/grassroots-opposition-offshore-drilling-and-exploration-atlantic-ocean-and> (last visited Feb. 20, 2019); *see also* Oceana, *Opposition to New Offshore Drilling in the Pacific Ocean*, <http://usa.oceana.org/pacific-drilling> (last visited Feb. 20, 2019).

² NOAA, Office of Response and Restoration, *The Toxicity of Oil: What's the Big Deal?* (Aug. 27, 2012), <https://response.restoration.noaa.gov/about/media/toxicity-oil-whats-big-deal.html>.

³ National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, *Deep Water, The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore drilling*, (January 2011), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-OILCOMMISSION/pdf/GPO->

recovering, physically and economically, from the estimated \$36.9 billion in damages caused by the *Deepwater Horizon* spill.⁴

Offshore oil development is dirty across the board, beyond the catastrophic spills that make headlines. Smaller spills happen on a routine basis during day-to-day rig operations, as well as during exploration, production, and transportation.⁵ At least 6,500 oil spills occurred in U.S. waters between 2007 and 2017, and a recent study found that spills are typically far larger than what is reported.⁶ During that same time period, hundreds of workers were injured every year and on average, a fire or explosion erupted on offshore rigs every three days on the Outer Continental Shelf.⁷ Expanding offshore drilling to new frontiers when the industry remains dirty and dangerous is both ill-advised and out of touch with the needs and wishes of those who inhabit the coast.

Offshore oil and gas exploration activities such as high-intensity geophysical seismic surveys, pose dangers to marine life before commercial drilling even begins. In November 2018, the federal government issued Incidental Harassment Authorizations for private companies to harm marine mammals during seismic surveys for oil and gas in a stretch of the Atlantic from Cape May, New Jersey to Cape Canaveral, Florida. BOEM is currently working on the second stage of this process, the finalization and issuance of Geological and Geophysical permits that will allow these companies' vessels to begin seismic airgun blasting.

Noise from these dynamite-like blasts is so loud that it can disturb, injure, or even kill animals across the entire marine ecosystem from the smallest zooplankton to the largest whales.⁸ The

[OILCOMMISSION.pdf](#) and Haney, J. C., Geiger, H. J., and Short, J. W. (2014). *Bird mortality from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill*. Inter-Research Marine Ecology Progress Series, 513.

⁴ Lawrence. C. Smith et al., *Analysis of Environmental and Economic Damages from British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil spill*, 74 Albany L. Rev. 563, 563–85 (2011).

⁵ Cheryl McMahan Anderson et al., BOEM, *Update of Occurrence Rates for Offshore Oil Spills* (2012), available at

https://www.boem.gov/uploadedFiles/BOEM/Environmental_Stewardship/Environmental_Assessment/Oil_Spill_Modeling/AndersonMayesLabelle2012.pdf.

⁶ Oceana. *Dirty Drilling: Trump Administration Proposals Weaken Key Safety Protections and Radically Expand Offshore Drilling*. (2019), available:

https://usa.oceana.org/sites/default/files/offshore_drilling_safety_report_final_0.pdf

⁷ Oceana. *Dirty Drilling: Trump Administration Proposals Weaken Key Safety Protections and Radically Expand Offshore Drilling*. (2019), available:

https://usa.oceana.org/sites/default/files/offshore_drilling_safety_report_final_0.pdf

⁸ McCauley RD, Day RD, Swadling KM, et al. (2017) Widely used marine seismic survey air gun operations negatively impact zooplankton. *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 1: 0195. doi:

10.1038/s41559-017-0195; Farmer NA, Baker K, Zeddies DG, et al. (2018) Population consequences of disturbance by offshore oil and gas activity for endangered sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*). *Biological Conservation* 227: 189–204. doi:

10.1016/j.biocon.2018.09.006; Castellote M, Clark CW and Lammers MO (2012) Acoustic and behavioural changes by fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) in response to shipping and airgun noise. *Biological Conservation* 147: 115–122. doi: 10.1016/j.biocon.2011.12.021; Cerchio S,

North Atlantic right whale — one of the most endangered marine mammal species in the world — is a particular concern as its only known calving grounds are located in coastal and offshore waters from the Carolinas through northern Florida. Experts say seismic airgun blasting for oil and gas exploration may well represent a tipping point for the survival of this critically endangered whale.⁹

Threatening our oceans with harmful exploration and drilling would be a short-sighted and permanent mistake. Given the Trump administration’s proposal to expand offshore drilling to nearly all federal waters, it is time for Congress restore the precedent of enacting appropriations moratoria to protect our oceans and coastal communities once again.

We ask the Committee to restrict any funding provided to the Department of Interior in the FY2021 Interior-Environment Appropriations bill to prohibit the Department from conducting any oil and gas preleasing, leasing, and related activities for any areas excluded from the 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program. The threats to coastal economies, marine wildlife, and your own constituents are simply too great to risk expanding the footprint of offshore drilling. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.

Strindberg S, Collins T, Bennett C and Rosenbaum H (2014) Seismic Surveys Negatively Affect Humpback Whale Singing Activity off Northern Angola. PLoS ONE 9: e86464. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0086464; de Soto NA, Delorme N, Atkins J, et al. (2013) Anthropogenic noise causes body malformations and delays development in marine larvae. Scientific Reports 3 doi: 10.1038/srep02831; McCauley RD, Fewtrell J and Popper AN (2003) High intensity anthropogenic sound damages fish ears. The journal of the acoustical society of America 113: 638–642.

⁹ Oceana. Seismic Airgun Blasting Could Be the Tipping Point for North Atlantic Right Whales https://usa.oceana.org/sites/default/files/17335/narw_and_seismic_factsheet_final_3.25.19_-_with_sources.pdf