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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

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**“What More Gulf of Mexico Oil and Gas Leasing Means
for Achieving U.S. Climate Targets”**

Good afternoon Chairperson Lowenthal, Ranking Member Stauber, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Beverly Wright, and I am the founding executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans, Louisiana.¹ At the Center, we work to improve the lives of children and families harmed by pollution and vulnerable to climate change in the Gulf Coast Region. We do this through education, research, community engagement, and worker training programs. We foster collaborative projects among communities, students, scientists, and policymakers that promote the right of all people to be free from environmental harm as it impacts health, jobs, housing, education, and quality of life. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony on the impacts of oil and gas leasing in the Gulf of Mexico and what more leasing means for achieving U.S. climate targets.

Impacts of Oil and Gas Leasing in the Gulf of Mexico

For more than 80 years, oil and gas leases have been issued off the coast of Louisiana.² In this time, Indigenous communities have lost forested lands to ongoing coastal erosion brought on by the extensive network of oil and gas pipelines.³ Historic Black communities have been vacated due to toxic exposures and contamination from inland oil refineries and petrochemical industries.⁴ Over the course of 30 years, oil and gas leasing and all the infrastructure for drilling

¹ Beverly Wright Curriculum Vitae, Appendix 1.

² See U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, History of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry in Southern Louisiana, September 2008, vol. 1, p. 30, available at <https://espis.boem.gov/final%20reports/4530.pdf> (noting that in 1936 Louisiana leased a combined 33,000 acres offshore to the Pure Oil Company and the Superior Oil Company).

³ Saskia de Melker and Melanie Saltzman, “Native American Community Relocates as Land Washes Away,” PBS News Hour, July 30, 2016, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/native-community-louisiana-relocates-land-washes-away>.

⁴ Bullard, Robert D., Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994 (documenting the lost Black communities of Reveilletown, Sunrise, and Morrisonville in Louisiana); Lerner, Steve, Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana’s Chemical Corridor, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006;

platforms, pipelines, and industrial facilities were firmly established before Black people gained the right to vote.

For more than 50 years, the oil and gas industry has dominated the Gulf Coast Region to the detriment of Black communities engulfed in the massive amounts of toxic pollution from oil refining and the manufacturing of plastics from oil and gas feedstocks. In the 2019 Toxic Release Inventory, the petroleum sectors report the release of 11 million pounds of pollution in 25 Louisiana parishes. Much of this pollution is released from multiple facilities located in close proximity to Black residents. These facilities release chemicals in the air that are scientifically known to cause cancer as well as damage heart and lung functions which make it difficult to breathe and cause premature death.

Black communities are disproportionately exposed to oil and gas operations, where the view from windows is oil and gas storage tanks, oil refinery smokestacks, or gas-fired power plants. A national report by the NAACP found that over 1 million Black people in the United States live within a half mile of at least one oil or gas facility and in areas where pollution from these facilities exceeds EPA's cancer risk guidelines.⁵ This report is further confirmation of the connection between pollution and race and the existence of environmental racism, which is well documented in reports by governmental and non-governmental entities. The source of oil and gas pollution in Black communities are the oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico.

With each hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, there is growing concern regarding the lack of preparedness and response to oil spills and other industrial hazards. Even air monitoring is mired in resistance by some state governments to collect and share data on toxic releases during a disaster.⁶

There is a massive array of pipelines and platforms in shallow and deep waters in the Gulf of Mexico. *See below Graphic: Detailed Map of Active Oil and Gas Leases and Infrastructure as of May 2021*, prepared by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE).⁷ The map below does not include the recent federal offshore leases that occurred in November 2021 in which companies placed bids on 1.7 million acres.⁸ According to BOEMRE, a total of approximately 11 million acres of the Gulf of Mexico are now subject to active leases.⁹

Heather Rogers, "Erasing Mossville: How Pollution Killed a Louisiana Town," *The Intercept*, November 4, 2015, available at <https://theintercept.com/2015/11/04/erasing-mossville-how-pollution-killed-a-louisiana-town/>.

⁵ NAACP, *Fumes Across the Fenceline: Fumes Across the Fence-Line: The Health Impacts of Air Pollution from Oil & Gas Facilities on African American Communities*, 2017, available at <https://naacp.org/resources/fumes-across-fence-line-health-impacts-air-pollution-oil-gas-facilities-african-american>.

⁶ Mark Schleifstein, "Louisiana refineries, chemical plants flaring at full blast; 15 air monitors knocked out," *The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com*, September 2, 2021, available at https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_6c017212-0c2d-11ec-b3ff-3b08d3c3460d.html; Susan Rust and Louis Sahagun, "Post-Hurricane Harvey: NASA tried to fly a pollution-spotting plane over Houston. The EPA said no," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2019, available at <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-nasa-jet-epa-hurricane-harvey-20190305-story.html>.

⁷ Graphic map with zoom functions available at https://www.boem.gov/sites/default/files/documents/about-boem/Visual-1-Active-Leases-and-Infrastructure_2.pdf.

⁸ Nathan Rott, "The Biden Administration Sold Oil and Gas Leases Days after the Climate Summit," NPR News, Nov. 17, 2021, available at <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/17/1056713397/the-biden-administration-sold-oil-and-gas-leases-days-after-the-climate-summit>.

⁹ BOEMRE, *Combined Leasing Report as of January 1, 2022*, available at <https://www.boem.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Lease%20stats%201-1-22.pdf>.

Pursuant to a lease, the exploration for oil and gas typically involves seismic activity that harms marine ecosystems. The discovery of oil or gas leads to production requiring transport via pipeline or vessels to refineries where oil spills or gas leaks can result in contamination, fires, or explosions. The BP oil spill disaster in 2010 involved the exploration for oil in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico which caused the biggest environmental disaster in US history. BP responded to the spill in ways that magnified the damage with toxic air emissions, the use of harmful chemicals to disperse the oil, and disposal in landfills located in close proximity to Black communities.¹⁰ The BP oil spill disaster claimed the lives of eleven people, injured seventeen, and wreaked havoc on the health and livelihoods of Gulf Coast residents.

Poor oversight of oil and gas activities in the Gulf of Mexico has resulted in more than 27,000 abandoned wells without regular monitoring on the ocean floor of federal waters and another 3,200 wells without any plugging to prevent leaks.¹¹ These wells leak methane and other gases that contribute to the climate crisis. A former BOEM employee explained that notwithstanding requirements for plugging these wells, ensuring the requirements are met are “beyond the scope and capability of the resources the agency has.”¹² Toxic air pollution, contamination, soil degradation, damage to ecosystems, and risk of explosions are impacts of abandoned wells that threaten human health and sustainability. The environmental risks do not go away with wells that are considered properly plugged. Rusting, re-pressurization, and failures with the plug itself can give rise to environmental impacts from plugged wells.

Oil and Gas Leases Do Not Include Climate Targets

The purpose of US climate targets is to protect human life and stave off planetary destruction from climate change. These targets come years after mounting damage to human health and environment caused by exposure to toxic chemicals, which are co-pollutants released with greenhouse gases from industrial smokestacks and vehicle tailpipes. The climate targets essentially call for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 – 52 percent from 2005 levels by the year 2030. However, meeting the climate targets is not a mandate for oil, gas or other fossil fuel companies or the users of fossil fuels. The targets are not included in the terms of the offshore oil and gas leases that were recently issued in November 2021. The oil and gas companies that have leased new acres of the Gulf of Mexico can operate as if the climate crisis does not exist. Each lease that finds a producing well moves us further away from, not closer to, meeting the climate targets.

Notwithstanding the damaging effects of oil and gas leases on Louisiana communities and the environment, the State of Louisiana along with 12 other state governments won a federal court ruling last year that blocks the application of US climate targets to offshore oil and gas leases. The preliminary injunction removes the federal pause on leasing that is set forth in President

¹⁰ Nance, Earthea, King, D., Wright, B. and Bullard, R.D., Ambient Air Concentrations Exceeded Health-Based Standards for PM2.5 and Benzene during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill,” [Journal of Air and Waste Management](#), 2016.

¹¹ Jeff Donn and Mitch Weiss, “Gulf Awash in 27,000 Abandoned Wells,” NBC News, July 6, 2010, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna38113914> ; Jeff Donn, “High Risk in Multitude of Abandoned Wells,” [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#), April 21, 2011, available at <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/2011/04/21/high-risk-in-multitude-of-unplugged-wells/29011603007/>.

¹² Hannah Seo, “Unplugged: Abandoned Oil and Gas Wells Leave the Ocean Floor Spewing Methane,” [Environmental Health News](#), December 8, 2020, available at <https://www.ehn.org/oil-and-gas-wells-methane-oceans-2649126354/particle-8>.

Biden's Executive Order 14008, which calls for an all of government approach to tackling climate change and delivering environmental justice.¹³

The major loss from the court's preliminary injunction is the important work undertaken by the Department of the Interior, pursuant to the Executive Order, to assess the wide-ranging impacts of offshore oil and gas operations. Completing this assessment is central to the task of meeting US climate targets by informing the direction of the Interior's leasing program to ensure environmental justice and deliver equitable climate solutions. There can be no meaningful assessment to meet climate targets with the continued leasing of millions of more acres for oil and gas development.

Conclusion

I have discussed above how oil and gas leases are not required to meet US climate targets and have given rise to the massive environmental harms that are disproportionately felt by Black and Indigenous communities in the Gulf Coast Region. While there are environmental regulations, they have proven to be inadequate to protect the health and safety of communities from toxic chemicals. Similarly, climate targets by themselves are inadequate to reduce greenhouse gases.

Given the state we are now in where there is precious little time to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to stave off the worst effects of climate change, it is critical that committee members consider solutions for meeting US climate targets. I strongly recommend the following:

- (1) establish compliance with US climate targets for the oil and gas industry;
- (2) require health protections for communities harmed by the extraction, transport, burning, and disposal of fossil fuels;
- (3) prohibit racially disproportionate pollution burdens;
- (4) expand the reach of the Superfund responsible parties to compensate the clean up and plugging of abandoned wells, as well as the regular monitoring of all existing wells;
- (5) stand up an expert federal team for disaster planning, preparedness and response on oil spills and other industrial hazards resulting from hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico; and
- (6) hold companies accountable for abandoned wells in the Gulf of Mexico.

¹³ Louisiana v. Biden, 2-21-cv-0078, Western District of Louisiana, June 15, 2021.

Graphic 1: Detailed Map of Active Oil and Gas Leases and Infrastructure as of May 2021, prepared by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE).

