

## **Douglas (Doug) Helton Testimony**

**May 20, 2025**

Legislative Hearing

Room 1324 of the Longworth House Office Building

House Natural Resources subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources

Chairman Stauber, Ranking Member Ansari, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the major risks of offshore drilling and the importance of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in protecting the American people, coastal communities, and marine ecosystems from harm, particularly in the context of offshore oil and gas drilling.

### **BACKGROUND**

My name is Doug Helton, and until recently, I served as the Regional Operations Supervisor for NOAA's Emergency Response Division, providing scientific and technical support during oil spill responses. After 33 years of service, I retired a few weeks ago along with over 1,000 other NOAA employees driven out by the Trump administration's efforts to gut the agency and the critical data and services it provides for the American people. Together, we represented a loss of 27,000 years of expertise at the agency, a loss that endangers Americans' health, safety, and economies.

As an oil spill expert, this danger is particularly troubling as the Administration and some members of Congress seek to expand the footprint of offshore drilling nationwide. During my time at NOAA, I worked on oil spills, shipwrecks, abandoned vessels, and emergency response efforts in almost all coastal states, ranging from Maine to American Samoa, including Deepwater Horizon. I have extensive experience in oil spill preparedness and response, including work across the U.S., the Arctic, and Alaska. As the NOAA and Department of Commerce representative to the Alaska Regional Response Team, I supported statewide and transboundary incident response. I served as a U.S. delegate to the Arctic Council's emergency preparedness subcommittee and worked on transboundary pollution agreements. I also chaired the federally mandated Oil Spill Recovery Institute in Cordova, Alaska, which was created in response to the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Before my NOAA career, I conducted salmon research in Bristol Bay and the Bering Sea, where I had previously worked as a commercial fisherman.

Given my extensive experience in oil spill recovery, my deep concern about cuts to NOAA's operations, and my recognition of the opposition by communities to the expansion of drilling to their coasts, I am here today to testify in opposition to the Offshore Lands Authorities Act of 2025 and the CORE Act of 2025.

### **Opposition to Offshore Lands Authorities Act of 2025**

I understand that the Offshore Lands Authorities Act of 2025 not only looks to revoke the permanent ocean protections for the Atlantic, Pacific, and Eastern Gulf coasts as well as the

Arctic Ocean areas that Presidents Biden and Obama withdrew from oil and gas leasing disposition, but also goes further to significantly limit the ability of future presidents to withdraw areas by limiting the amount of ocean that can be withdrawn and removing the president's ability to permanently protect certain areas, among other provisions.

Unchecked oil and gas development in our coastal waters comes at the expense of our ocean, public health, local businesses, fisheries, and marine ecosystems. The permanent withdrawals of this past January by President Biden as well as the September 2020 withdrawals by President Trump of the waters of the Southeastern United States for 10 years (from and including the waters of North Carolina through Florida – came in response to decades of building opposition to drilling by coastal communities, including opposition from members of Congress on both sides of the aisle representing these very communities. To date, nearly 400 municipalities and counties and over 2,300 elected officials – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents – across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf have formally opposed the expansion of offshore drilling to their coasts. In addition to individual citizen voices and those of elected officials, voices from defense communities and business coalitions representing over 55,000 coastal businesses and 500,000 fishing families along the three coasts of the Lower 48 weighed in, calling for the previous administration to issue permanent coastal protections. These ocean areas should remain protected. The voices of the people who live in these coastal communities that would be negatively impacted by this bill are overwhelming in their opposition to drilling.

I believe that many of the millions of Americans who want their coasts protected from drilling and spilling have memories of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which unfolded 15 years ago this past April 20, and which has had long-lasting effects on the Gulf, its ecosystems, and the people who call it home. And many of those local residents who participated in the cleanup in the gulf, like after other large spills, reported harmful long-term health impacts.

I also remember the Deepwater Horizon spill. I was notified early in the morning that the rig was on fire and at risk of sinking. We had the first trajectory and oil fate model analysis within a few hours. The first of hundreds of such forecasts. I worked 16 hour days until the well was capped 87 days later. And the cleanup and damage assessment continued for years after that.

But those of us whose lives have been about responding to spills know it's the lesser-known spills as well, including those members of this Subcommittee have never heard of or have forgotten, that can disrupt coastal communities. I think of the Tampa Bay spill over 30 years ago, which was the result of the collision of three ships, and which provided the foundation for today's critical emergency response and damage assessment techniques. Despite emergency cleanup efforts, the oil fouled 13 miles of beaches and caused injury to birds, sea turtles, mangrove habitat, seagrasses, salt marshes, shellfish beds, as well as closing many of the waterways to fishing and boating.

Every year, NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration responds to over 150 oil and chemical spills in U.S. waters. Whenever and wherever you drill, produce, transport and store oil, there is

risk, and this bill would dangerously expand those risks into new regions with limited ability to respond, particularly as agency budgets are being cut.

I'd like to specifically bring the Subcommittee's attention to what an oil spill in Alaska would mean if these areas were opened to oil and gas. At NOAA, I worked extensively on designing spill response alternatives for Alaska and was a signatory to a plan to use chemical dispersants if a major spill occurred. Not because this technique is favored, but rather based on the recognition that few other response technologies could be feasible in remote, ice-prone regions of the Arctic.

The North Slope region of Alaska is larger than many U.S. states but home to fewer than 10,000 residents, most of whom are scattered among dozens of isolated, small communities only accessible by air. The area is hundreds of miles from cities like Fairbanks and Anchorage and mobilizing the proper equipment can take weeks. Caring for the number of responders needed would be logistically impossible in the region or in other areas like the Bering Sea. While sea ice is diminishing in the region, the area is still subject to severe storms, long winter darkness, and other challenges that would severely complicate any cleanup response.

Even in accessible areas, mechanical cleanup of any large spill is highly unlikely. For example, during the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, which was only 50 miles off the Gulf Coast and near the center of the oil and gas industry, only a fraction of the spilled oil was recovered, despite a response of more than 45,000 people at its peak and access to a stockpile of specialized underwater robotic vehicles, multiple drilling ships, spill response vessels, and other equipment.

Eliminating current and future ocean protections as laid out in Congressman Higgins' bill opens the door to oil and gas development on every coast, risking an oil spill that we won't be able to clean up that would cause decades of harm to coastal communities and sensitive marine environments.

#### Opposition to CORE Act of 2025

While not my specific area of expertise, I want to briefly touch on my concerns around the CORE Act of 2025. This bill would prioritize seismic testing and exploratory drilling even in ecologically sensitive areas, including marine sanctuaries that are currently protected. Seismic surveys involve repeated, high-decibel blasts of air guns that can travel hundreds of miles underwater, which can seriously impact marine wildlife and habitats. Opening previously protected areas to these activities introduces serious and obvious risks.

#### Risks of Offshore Drilling & Cuts to NOAA

In addition to the increased risk of oil spills, expanding offshore drilling threatens billion-dollar coastal economies, including fishing, tourism, and recreation, which together support millions of jobs.

Climate-fueled disasters are already hurting coastal communities, driving up insurance rates, and causing property losses. Last year was the hottest year on record, with at least 27 climate disasters costing the United States over \$182 billion. Yet, this administration is moving to stop tracking the cost of these extreme weather disasters and Members of this committee just voted to repeal funding for coastal restoration and resilience in their reconciliation bill. I cannot imagine a worse time to open our coastlines to new exploration and drilling.

The risks to our ocean, coastal communities, and offshore workers are magnified by the Trump administration's rollback of safety regulations for fossil fuel projects, as well as the gutting of key federal agencies and programs that help clean up pollution from oil spills, like NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration. The administration has eliminated roughly 20% of NOAA's workforce through mass firings and early retirements, and aims to eliminate even more. The agency's critical work is being further degraded by contract cancellations and lapses stemming from Secretary Lutnick's freeze on contracts over \$100,000 which has left scientists unable to conduct research.

We also know that the administration is seeking even more severe cuts that will further hinder our ability to prevent, monitor, and respond to future oil spills. Leaked documents and the President's FY26 budget propose a 75% reduction in funding to NOAA Research and a 27% cut to NOAA's overall budget. These dramatic staffing and agency budget cuts paired with safety rollbacks, mean fewer inspections, weaker spill prevention, and slower emergency responses. As hurricane season rapidly approaches in just 12 days, the combination of reckless cuts and an expanded footprint for offshore drilling would spell disaster for our safety, health, and economies.

In closing, after more than three decades of responding to oil spills across the country, I've seen firsthand the major, and often irreparable, damage these spills cause, especially in sensitive and remote marine ecosystems. The Offshore Lands Authorities Act and the CORE Act ignore the voices of millions of Americans who want to see American coastlines protected from new drilling. They would increase the risk of catastrophic oil spills, including in areas with limited response capabilities, just as the very institutions we rely on to respond are being weakened by dramatic cuts to their budgets and workforce.

I respectfully urge the Subcommittee to consider these risks before moving forward with these two pieces of legislation. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.