

FACT SHEET

Too Much to Lose: Communities Demand the Southeast Coast Be Removed from the Interior Department's Offshore Oil and Gas Drilling Plan

Even though the BP oil spill was five years ago this spring, the devastating effects are still being felt along the Gulf Coast as communities and economies struggle to clean up and rebound. In spite of that, the federal government is considering opening up the Mid- and South Atlantic to offshore oil and gas drilling. The Interior Department's draft plan making the South Atlantic coasts available to oil and gas leasing is a significant shift in federal policy and a threat to the environment, economy, and lifestyle of the Southern coast. Communities along the coasts have spoken up to reverse this plan.

Big Oil Over Local Businesses and Jobs

The oil and gas industry has worked with intense pressure to try and open up the Southeast to offshore drilling. Despite the detrimental impacts on vital local industries, including tourism and fishing, the oil industry argues that drilling will bring new jobs and public revenues to the region.

But offshore drilling would bring in fewer economic benefits for states than the established, thriving coastal industries – industries that would be put at risk by drilling, both through the threat of a catastrophic spill like the BP disaster, as well as the industrialization of the coasts and impacts of routine drilling operations. Tourism and fishing – both commercial and recreational – are the economic backbone of states and hundreds of towns and cities along the Southern coast. According to government estimates, ocean-dependent tourism in the Mid- and South Atlantic contributes over [\\$6 billion and \\$4 billion annually](#) to coastal communities. Government estimates show that recreational fishing in these regions generated nearly \$3.3 billion in these areas, while the economic impacts of commercial fishing along the entire Mid-Atlantic Planning Area total more than \$1.5 billion in total value added.

Take the example of North Carolina. A [study favoring offshore oil and gas development](#) projected that the first seven years of drilling would generate \$11 million in public revenues for the state and create 1,122 jobs. The North Carolina [tourism industry](#), by contrast, created 206,700 jobs in 2013, and tourists' expenditures generated over \$3 billion in tax revenue. The numbers speak for themselves – offshore drilling would threaten large numbers of steady jobs and state revenues for a much smaller number of possible jobs from drilling.

The Atlantic Coast is Environmentally Valuable – and Fragile

The Atlantic Coast is one of the most environmentally valuable regions of the country – and one of the most catastrophic areas for a potential spill. Dozens of national wildlife refuges, marine protected areas, and national seashores and beaches are located along the coast. The coastal environment provides protection not just to wildlife but to people living in these areas. Marshes and hammocks filter out pollutants to drinking water and help protect against dangerous hurricanes, while coastal wetlands act as the front lines against flood protection and erosion control.

Hundreds of species of unique wildlife live and flourish on beaches and off the coast – and would be adversely affected by a spill. Only 450 North Atlantic Right Whales remain in the world, making them one of the most endangered types of whales. The whales' [calving habitat](#) in the waters off the Carolinas and Georgia would be vulnerable to the effects of oil drilling. [Florida manatees](#), [loggerhead sea turtles](#), and Atlantic [sturgeon](#) are also threatened or endangered species, populations of which could be severely impacted by a major a spill – not to mention the varieties of important fish, including billfish, blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish, and spearfish, that swim off the Atlantic coast.

Lessons from the BP Disaster

The 2010 BP spill was disastrous for the Gulf coast, and the aftereffects and cleanup remain a major drain to the region. [One thousand miles of coastline](#), nearly the length of the entire East Coast, have still not bounced back to pre-spill productivity and environmental cleanliness. In the first months after the spill, the lucrative fishing industry suffered a [\\$172 million loss](#). Gulf Coast oyster beds in 2014 [produced less than a third](#) of their pre-spill harvest, and in 2013, the largest shrimp buyer and wholesaler in the Gulf [reported that business was 15 percent](#) of what it was before the spill. These economic damages could be permanent: the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska obliterated the prosperous herring industry, costing the region some [\\$400 million in damages](#) for a herring fishery that still has not recovered.

The environmental impacts of the spill have also made their mark. Nearly ten million gallons of crude has [settled at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico](#), where it seriously damages marine life and ecosystems. Oil continues to wash up on beaches in the form of [tar balls](#). And experts attribute a slew of bottlenose [dolphin deaths](#) from 2010-2013 to the spill. Making matters worse, Congress [has not passed a single](#) statute addressing the enormous legal gaps that led to the disaster, worrying many that there are no protections in place to prevent the same catastrophe from happening along the Atlantic coast.

Drilling Exploration Alone Destroys the Coasts

Even without a catastrophic spill, the industrialization and infrastructure associated with drilling – the rigs, refineries, pipelines, traffic, and routine spills and accidents – would irreparably change our coastal communities. And before any drilling even starts, oil and gas expansion into the Atlantic can do serious harm to the environment. Seismic testing uses loud [airguns](#) to test the ocean floor for fossil fuels. The sound of one gun going off is equivalent to a sound [louder than a jet engine at 100 feet](#) of earshot, and can be heard for [hundreds of miles](#). Seismic testing utilizes these blasts every ten seconds for days or weeks, with multiple companies covering the same areas repeatedly.

These gun blasts are so loud they can seriously injure, kill, or alter the behavior of marine life: the [Interior Department estimates](#) that over 130,000 marine mammals will be injured or killed by these blasts, and will result in over [13 million disturbances](#) in marine mammal behavior. Seismic gun blasts have a particularly [bad effect on whales](#), driving them out of their habitat, deafening them, and causing them to stop foraging for food. Mass [whale strandings](#) have occurred on the coast of Madagascar, where seismic testing has been used for oil exploration. Seismic blasts can also substantially alter the [migration patterns of fish](#), which would negatively impact fishing industries and ecosystems.

Seismic testing will impact [economically important](#) fisheries which contribute hundreds of millions of dollars to state economies and employ over [60,000 individuals](#) by [closing off](#) important fishing grounds to fishermen and impacting important fish habitat.

Communities Along the Coast Are Demanding the Mid-Atlantic Coast Be Removed from the Plan

All over the mid-Atlantic region, various groups and communities are uniting to protest the plan. To date, over 30 towns and cities up and down the coast have passed or are actively voting on [resolutions against offshore drilling and seismic testing for oil](#). Various local chambers of commerce, including the [South Carolina Small Business Chamber of Commerce](#) and the [Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce](#), and business entities like the [Southeastern Fisheries Association](#), [Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council](#), and the [International Game Fish Association](#) have voiced strong concerns about the plan.

And local politicians are listening to their constituents: over 20 North Carolina representatives have [spoken up](#) and opposed seismic testing, while Southeast mayors from [Charleston](#), [Jacksonville](#), and [St. Augustine](#) have written to the Interior Department to express disapproval of offshore drilling and testing. Communities are encouraging outraged residents to step up and submit comments on the Interior Department's draft plan online – the comment period closes March 30, and the Interior Department will create a new plan to release later in the year based partially on public comments received.

The Southern Environmental Law Center: The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional nonprofit using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC's team of more than 60 legal and policy experts represent more than 100 partner groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use.

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