



Too Much to Lose:

Communities Oppose Plan to Open the Southeast Coast to Offshore Drilling

The federal government proposed earlier this year to open the Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia coasts to offshore oil and gas leasing in 2021. This action, which would make the South Atlantic coasts available to oil and gas leasing for the first time in over 30 years, introduces a significant shift in federal policy and a threat to the environment, economy, and lifestyle of the Southeast coast.

All over the Southeast, communities, elected leaders, and impacted industries are uniting to oppose offshore drilling and related activities. To date, over 60 towns and cities up and down the coast have passed or are actively voting on [resolutions against offshore drilling and/or 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 [Virginia Beach Hotel and Restaurant Associations](#), the [Southeastern Fisheries Association](#), the [Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council](#), and the [International Game Fish Association](#) have voiced strong concerns about the plan to open the Southeast Coast.

And local politicians are listening to their constituents: over 20 North Carolina representatives have [spoken up](#) and opposed seismic testing, while several Southeast mayors from cities like [Charleston](#), [Jacksonville](#), [Hilton Head](#), and [St. Augustine](#) have written to the Interior Department to express disapproval of offshore drilling and testing. [Fifty-three U.S. Representatives](#) and [12 U.S. Senators](#) have also written to the Interior Department opposing the move. The federal government is currently reexamining and revising its proposed leasing plan and is expected to release a new draft plan in early 2016.



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 tourism and fishing—both commercial and recreational—are the economic backbone of states and hundreds of towns and cities along the Southeast coast. According to government estimates, ocean-dependent tourism in the Southeast contributes over [\\$6 billion and \\$4 billion annually](#) to coastal communities. Government estimates also show that recreational fishing in these regions generates 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—the tourism industry represents far more jobs along our coasts than the oil industry would ever offer.

These established, thriving coastal industries would be put at risk by drilling, both through the threat of a catastrophic spill like the BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, and through the impacts of routine drilling operations. Even without a major 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 economies.



The Southeast Coast Is Environmentally Valuable—and Fragile

The Southeast Coast is one of the most environmentally vulnerable and valuable regions of the country, making it 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 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 that live and flourish on beaches and off the coast would be adversely affected by a spill. North Atlantic Right Whales are one of the most endangered large whales, with fewer than 500 remaining in the wild. The whales' only known [calving habitat](#) in the waters off the Carolinas and Georgia would be vulnerable to the effects of oil drilling and seismic testing. [Florida manatees](#), [loggerhead sea turtles](#), and [Atlantic sturgeon](#) are also threatened or endangered species, populations of which could be severely impacted by a major spill—not to mention the varieties of important fish, including billfish, blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish, and spearfish, that swim off the Southeast coast.



Lessons from the BP Disaster

The 2010 BP oil spill was disastrous for the Gulf coast, and the aftereffects and cleanup remain a major drain to the region. 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 oil has [settled at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico](#), where it could seriously damage marine life and ecosystems. Oil continues to wash up on beaches in the form of [tar balls](#). And experts attribute a slew of [bottle-nose dolphin deaths](#) from 2010-2012 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 Southeast coast.



Seismic Exploration Alone Will Harm the Marine Environment

Even before any drilling starts, oil and gas expansion into the Atlantic is likely to 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—and it's been proposed off the coast of the Atlantic in preparation for oil and gas leasing sales.

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, over [13 million disturbances](#) in marine mammal behavior will occur. 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 could 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. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has [submitted comments to the federal government](#) expressing significant concerns that seismic testing will directly impact ecosystems, fish habitats, and the multi-million dollar fisheries that depend on them.

The federal government is currently considering nine applications for seismic testing in the Southeast, which could begin as early as this fall. Members of the public will have opportunities in the coming months to express their concerns about its impacts and what the industrialization of the marine and coastal environments could mean for the places they fish, swim, work, and call home.



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.