

## New leases for gulf oil exploration proposed

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — A federal agency plans to lease out an additional 657,905 acres of underwater property off the Gulf Coast of Florida for oil and natural gas exploration and possible drilling.

The public is invited to attend a meeting at 4 p.m. Tuesday at the Wyndham Bay Point Resort, 4114 Jan Cooley Drive, in Panama City Beach to give its input about the plan.

The public hearing is one of several scheduled by the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) in Florida, Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi to solicit comment that will be used to prepare the “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement” on the leasing proposal.

The underwater property is south of eastern Alabama and Western Florida. The nearest point of land from the proposed drilling location is 125 miles northwest of Louisiana.

There are currently 84 leases with oil companies in the Eastern Planning Area off the coast of the Panhandle, with 440,384 acres leased. But none of the leased properties are being drilled for oil at this time, said Gary Goeke, chief of BOEM’s environmental assessment section.

He said there is a moratorium on new drilling leases within 100 miles off the Florida coast.

“Basically, we’ve been leasing offshore to the highest bidders in the gulf for 50 years,” he said.

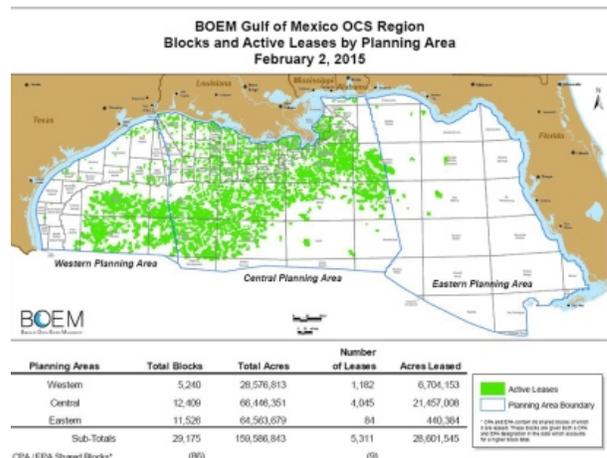
Goeke said the leasing agreements are for blocks of nine square miles, and that it could take years before any oil drilling took place.

“This is a lease offering for an oil company to have a chance at exploration,” he said. “If they did find something, then they would have the right to develop it, but it is long process.”

Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental advocacy organization based in New Orleans that works to help protect and restore the natural resources of the Gulf of Mexico, said she has concerns about the proposal to allow oil and gas exploration in this area. An oil spill there like the BP spill in 2010 could have devastating negative consequences for Panama City Beach, she said.

“There is a lot of concern because it’s pretty close to Florida,” she said. “As you saw from the BP drilling disaster, oil doesn’t respect coastal boundaries, and even though it’s 125 miles (from the shoreline), it’s not that far.”

The exploration drilling itself poses a risk, she said.



“That’s what happened with BP. They were drilling the well,” she said. “It’s risky because if they start to sink a well, and something unknown or unpredicted happens, you can have a blowout. Oil companies are under pretty high stress from shareholders to get those wells in pretty fast. Some companies are good (with safety measures) and some companies are still just as reckless as they used to be.”

The exploration process also involves seismic activity, which can be harmful to dolphins and whales, she said.

“It’s a high frequency sound and it can have a lot of high impacts on marine mammals,” she said. “There are some mitigation measures required now, but we still have concerns.”

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