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Judge tosses MDA's offshore drilling plans for South Mississippi

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A chancery judge jettisoned regulations for offshore drilling in state waters, finding the Mississippi Development Authority failed to complete any meaningful study of the economic impact.

Chancery Judge William H. Singletary ordered MDA to prepare a study resolving the deficiencies he outlined, which means offshore drilling will at the least be delayed.

He issued the ruling in a 2012 lawsuit the Sierra Club and Gulf Restoration Network filed against MDA. Singletary said MDA violated state law by failing to complete the study on permitting oil and gas exploration in the Mississippi Sound.

Without such a study, Singletary said, the state's offshore drilling regulations are "arbitrary and capricious and are not supported by substantial evidence."

MDA, he said, wrongly concluded the state's role in leasing oil and natural gas rights is "purely administrative." Instead, he said, the state's leasing process is directly linked to drilling.

MDA communication specialists did not return calls from the Sun Herald, instead emailing a statement: "We are aware of the court's ruling, and we are working with our attorneys to determine our next steps."

Robert Wiygul of Ocean Springs, attorney for the environmental groups, believes it will be "extraordinarily difficult" for MDA to show offshore drilling benefits Coast residents and businesses.

The state proposes drilling near barrier islands that are part of the protected Gulf Islands National Seashore. The islands draw tourists and residents for fishing and recreation.

"Right now, the ball is in the Mississippi Development Authority's court," Wiygul said. "They have a clear road map of what they need to do, and that is look at all the economic impacts that would come about if you have oil and gas drilling in the Mississippi Sound around our barrier islands.

"When you balance those resources against what you get from drilling out there, I think it's very unlikely drilling wins out. There are certain places where you don't need drilling and around our barrier islands is one of them."

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