



PRESS RELEASE

Coalition of Attorneys General Oppose First Step in Plan to Permit Offshore Drilling off Atlantic Coast

Letter Submitted to National Marine Fisheries Service Notes the Harm to Marine Life and Coastline

BALTIMORE, MD (July 21, 2017) - Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh, joined by attorneys general from eight other states, today submitted comments opposing the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) proposal to conduct deep penetration surveys in the Atlantic Ocean. In the [letter](#) submitted today, the attorneys general point out that the surveys pose a significant risk to the coastline, the environment, and to marine life.

"The proposed seismic tests are themselves disruptive and harmful. Worse, they are the precursors to offshore drilling that would put the Chesapeake Bay at risk to drilling related contamination," said Attorney General Frosh. "That contamination would have catastrophic impacts on fragile ecosystems and important economies. This is a foolish gamble with our precious natural resources."

To conduct the surveys, vessels tow large arrays of seismic air guns that shoot loud blasts of compressed air through the ocean and miles under the seafloor, every 10 seconds for days, sometimes weeks. The air gun blasting can cause disruptions in migration, feeding and reproduction of marine mammals, fish and other marine creatures on the ocean floor. The harm caused by seismic surveys has been studied and documented by scientists. A study published this year by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – the agency that oversees NMFS – concluded that reef fish abundance declined 78% during seismic testing. Scientists for the first time found last month that air gun blasts kill large numbers of zooplankton, the invertebrates at the base of the marine food chain necessary to the survival of many marine species. In the letter submitted today, the attorneys general note, "*NMFS has failed to meet its responsibility under the Marine Mammal Protection Act to effect 'the least practicable adverse impact on such species or stock and its habitat.'*"

Additionally, the proposed seismic surveys are the first step in the process to allow for offshore drilling in the Atlantic from Delaware to Florida – an action that could result in severe and irreparable harm to the coastline and marine life. The surveys are designed to acquire data over large areas to screen for potential oil and gas drilling. After an extensive public input process, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) removed from the Five-Year program the sale that was proposed for the Mid-and South Atlantic area – signaling that drilling off the Atlantic coast is ill-advised.

Despite that action, in April 2017, President Trump issued Executive Order 13795, Implementing an America-First Offshore Energy Strategy. Following that order, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) rescinded prior denials (January 2017) of applications for geological and geophysical surveys in the Atlantic Ocean and resumed reviewing those applications. One necessary component to the permitting process is for the companies to also obtain incidental harassment authorizations from NMFS. As a result of the Executive Order and the rescission of the application denials, NMFS is moving forward with the proposed incidental harassment authorizations.

The attorneys general note the history of damage and risks as a result of offshore drilling:

“As manifested in Prince William Sound following the Exxon Valdez spill and along the Gulf Coast following the Deepwater Horizon disaster, they are concrete, enduring, and profound. These risks have prompted more than 120 East Coast communities, including the City of Baltimore and Ocean City, Maryland, as well as local, state, and federal elected officials to formally oppose oil and gas exploration, including seismic survey activities. More than 35,000 businesses and 500,000 commercial fishing families along the Atlantic Coast from Maine to Florida oppose seismic testing and offshore oil and gas drilling exploration because it threatens the coastal ecosystem on which 1.4 million commercial fishing, tourism, and recreation jobs depend.”

The attorneys general conclude that, *“...the harassment of marine life to be authorized under this proposal is unjustified and unwarranted....the proposed seismic surveys present risks to the affected regions that far outweigh any benefit. Accordingly, all five pending applications should be denied.”*

In addition to Maryland, attorneys general from Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island signed the letter.