



Offshore program to protect environment, expand exploration

When President Trump announced in 2017 his administration was reopening the five-year plan process for the 2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Program, the announcement was met with applause from oil and gas producing regions like Louisiana whose residents understand the economic value of expanded offshore oil and gas production. As House Speaker Paul Ryan tweeted, “It means more jobs, more revenue and more energy produced right here in America!”

As we await the final five-year offshore plan expected to open more Gulf, Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic waters to oil and gas exploration and yield these economic benefits, scientists at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) are hard at work identifying and assessing any environmental impacts of all this offshore activity. The mission of BOEM, after all, is “to manage development of the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf energy and mineral resources in an environmentally and economically responsible way.” Extensive environmental studies, performed by experts within the bureau’s Environmental Studies

Program, are vital components in the offshore lease plan decision-making process.

According to the U.S. Department of Interior, more than three billion barrels of oil and 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas are estimated to lie off the OCS. The potential for development of these untapped domestic energy resources is tremendous, but administration officials and industry alike also recognize responsible development of these resources compels us to consider and address environmental concerns as well. That is why the job of the Environmental Studies Program (ESP) staff is so important.

This office of biologists, oceanographers, chemists, environmental scientists and other professionals develops, funds and manages rigorous scientific research specifically to inform policy decisions on potential impacts from the development of energy and mineral resources on the OCS. Their research covers such issues as seabed and coastal land disturbances, oil and chemical discharges, air quality, marine diversity and productivity, protected species, social sciences and economics, submerged cultur-

al landscapes and many other environmental effects. According to BOEM, the ESP has conducted over \$1 billion in research since 1973, and the long-term vision for the program is to be the best research program possible within the context of BOEM’s mission.

Much of that work can be found in the Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) produced for five-year offshore leasing plans, like the 2019-2024 plan now being developed. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to consider potential environmental impacts of any action they propose. When developing a five-year plan for the National OCS Oil and Gas Program, the U.S. Interior secretary must consider eight factors for determining the size, timing and location of potential lease sales, and ecological characteristics, environmental sensitivity and marine productivity are all factors on that list.

To provide the secretary with the information needed to make those decisions, the ESP researches and produces several EIS throughout the plan development process. These EIS identify and analyze potential

environmental impacts on oil and gas leasing in the specified OCS area, describe ways to effectively avoid those impacts, and assess other viable alternatives to the proposed lease plan. Ultimately, the secretary considers the final Programmatic EIS together with the National OCS Program to determine the schedule and location of offshore lease sales. Clearly, environmental protection has a big seat at the table when it comes to developing our nation’s program for offshore exploration and production of domestic oil and gas.

The latest five-year plan will go into effect next year, and the members of LMOGA are hopeful this administration’s efforts to launch America’s energy dominance through the expansion of offshore development in OCS waters are successful. We know, through the diligent work of BOEM’s Environmental Studies Program, this decision will be supported by science and a commitment by industry and policy makers alike to preserve and protect our environmental and ecological resources.

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