

# Australia opens up offshore oil, gas exploration

May 17 2010

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This handout photo shows an Australian offshore gas production platform in the North West Shelf (NWS) gas project. Australia on Monday said it would open more than 30 new offshore sites for oil and gas exploration, despite concerns from environmentalists that they could clash with marine sanctuaries.

Australia on Monday said it would open more than 30 new offshore sites for oil and gas exploration, despite concerns from environmentalists that they could clash with marine sanctuaries.

Federal Resources Minister Martin Ferguson said 26 of the 31 exploration areas were in Western Australia, which already has significant offshore energy projects, while others were in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

"Our energy security will be greatly enhanced by the opening up of new geological frontiers, reducing our dependence on imports," Ferguson said.

"Exploration in the areas under offer, some of which are in frontier areas, is a step towards achieving our energy security objective."

Ferguson said Australia has a 16 billion dollar (14 billion US) trade deficit in crude [oil](#), refined products and LPG, which is expected to rise, possibly as high as 30 billion dollars by 2015.

The announcement means that companies will be able to bid for the right to explore the sites, which vary in size, with contracts to be awarded by May 2011 at the latest.

But conservationists were concerned by the announcement, with the Pew Environment Group saying some exploration had been approved in areas which had also been earmarked as potential marine wildlife reserves.

"Pretty much all the areas announced today are right over the top of areas that the Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett is looking at for protection and that's because these areas are critically important for marine life," the group's Michelle Grady told ABC Radio.

The Western Australia Conservation Council said the new leases had the potential to devastate marine life along the coast which is famous for its surf beaches, dolphins and whales.

"What is happening in the Gulf of Mexico now could just as easily happen off the beaches of southwest Australia," spokesman Tim Nichol said in reference to the huge oil spill from a leaking rig in the United States.

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Citation: Australia opens up offshore oil, gas exploration (2010, May 17) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-australia-offshore-oil-gas-exploration.html>

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