

US mulls seismic tests to map oil drilling potential in Atlantic

January 11 2014, by Sean Cockerham

The Obama administration is nearing a decision on allowing seismic testing off the Atlantic Coast, a critical step in opening waters off Virginia, the Carolinas and elsewhere to oil drilling.

A study of what the controversial seismic tests would do to whales, dolphins and fish is on track for release at the end of February, an Interior Department official told lawmakers Friday. The proposal received more than 55,000 public comments.

The tests are being considered from Delaware to Florida's Cape Canaveral, although most of the push for offshore drilling is in the areas off North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. Walter Cruickshank, deputy director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, said the tests would reveal just how much oil and natural gas lies in the nation's mid and south Atlantic.

"The existing information was acquired decades ago with now-outdated technology," Cruickshank told the House energy subcommittee.

The federal government estimates 3.3 billion barrels of oil and 31.28 trillion cubic feet of [natural gas](#) along the entire Atlantic seabed. That's hardly the makings of a boom, and it's nine times smaller than estimated oil reserves off the Arctic coast of Alaska. But the Atlantic estimates from the 1970s and 1980s are no doubt conservative, said James Knapp, a professor of earth and ocean sciences at the University of South Carolina, who also testified Friday. Modern seismic tests would provide

a far better picture, he said.

There's contention over allowing the tests, though. The process involves vessels towing an array of seismic air guns that blast compressed air underwater, sending intense sound waves to the bottom of the ocean. The booms are repeated every 10 seconds or so for days or weeks, with their echoes used to map the location of the subsea oil and gas deposits.

No environmental groups were invited to testify at Friday's House of Representatives hearing on air guns, chaired by Rep. Doug Lamborn, a Republican drilling supporter from Colorado. But Oceana campaign director Claire Douglass said in an email that air gun blasts 100,000 times more intense than a jet engine pose threats to marine mammals, including the endangered right whale.

"These dynamite-like blasts can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss, which can seriously harm animals that depend on their hearing for critical life-sustaining behaviors such as feeding, mating and communicating," Douglass wrote.

Some 50 members of Congress, including a few Republicans, are also opposing the tests and have sent letters to President Barack Obama suggesting that the Department of Interior's own estimates indicate that up to 138,500 marine mammals could be injured.

The [oil industry](#) and members of Congress who support seismic testing said the fears of harm are overblown. They said care is taken to protect the marine mammals, and that the process is routine in Canada and the Gulf of Mexico. There has been debate in the Gulf of Mexico, though, where the oil industry, environmental groups and government agencies settled a lawsuit last summer by putting some areas off limits to air gun testing for 30 months while environmental studies are conducted.

Knapp, of the University of South Carolina's department of earth and ocean sciences, said the seismic testing offers a "truly historic opportunity" to evaluate the energy potential of the Atlantic, where oil drilling has been blocked for decades.

"I see no reason why we couldn't conduct those surveys in a safe and effective manner," he told the congressional subcommittee.

Politicians and the [oil](#) industry are pushing hard for the president to open up the Atlantic waters to [oil drilling](#), with the industry's main trade group suggesting the most economic potential for revenue and jobs lies in North Carolina, followed by South Carolina and then Virginia.

The governors of those states all support drilling off their coasts. The Obama administration will focus next year on deciding whether to include Atlantic drilling in the next federal offshore leasing plan, which runs from 2017 through 2022.

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