Research shows beachgoers negatively impacted by offshore oil platforms

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In some areas, California beach fans must live with offshore oil platforms. UD research indicates 16 percent of Delaware beachgoers would not go to a beach with oil platforms looming offshore. Credit: University of Delaware

Every year, visitors flock to Delaware's beaches for an opportunity to relax, soak up the sun and take a dip in the ocean.

But if offshore energy platforms—especially oil rigs—were installed off the Delaware coastline, many of those visitors would move their beach

blankets elsewhere, according to University of Delaware research.

Forty percent of beachgoers responding to a UD survey that was administered in 2012 said their vacation experience would be negatively impacted, and 16 percent indicated they simply would not visit the beach with oil platforms looming offshore.

The research was led by Jacob Fooks, who was a doctoral student in economics at UD when the research was conducted, and Kent Messer, the Unidel Howard Cosgrove Chair for the Environment in UD's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR).

Josh Duke, professor in the Department of Applied Economics and Statistics, and George Parsons, professor in the College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment, are also authors on the paper which was published recently in the journal *Energy Policy*.

Messer said the results from the study should worry the leaders of beach communities who may be considering these offshore energy sources because they could experience a drop off of 10 to 15 percent of their visitors.

"Can the beach communities lose 15 percent of their tourists?," Messer said. "These people will go elsewhere and another 25 percent of the group is going to come and not really enjoy their visit as much. That's a big impact."

The research was conducted at Rehoboth Beach and Cape Henlopen from July 12–15 and July 29–August 1 in 2012.

A total of 525 people participated in the research by completing either a short survey about their opinions regarding a series of images of oil platforms and wind turbines offshore at various distances or by taking a

more in-depth, longer survey using computer simulations that presented images of oil platforms or wind turbines on the horizon at varying distances.

In both surveys, participants were shown oil platforms and wind turbines at different distances and asked if those structures would have enhanced, detracted or made no difference to their beach experiences.

Around 60 percent of those who took the short survey indicated that oil platforms would detract from their beach experience, compared with 25 percent for the wind turbines.

Those who took the longer survey were able to select a starting location for the energy platforms.

"Even at ten miles out, which was the farthest the participants could place the oil platforms, many of the respondents would not visit the Delaware beaches at this distance—even though they wouldn't be able to see the platforms," Messer said. "Participants were clearly concerned about the oil spills that could affect the beaches. In contrast, people were more comfortable with having wind turbines closer to the shore."

In January 2018, the Trump Administration announced a new five-year drilling plan that could open new areas along both U.S. coasts. Messer said that it is important for coastal communities to realize the negative view many of their visitors have for offshore oil drilling structures.

"Our research shows that beach visitors do not like these oil platforms and believe they would detract from their experience," Messer said. "A bunch of people said they wouldn't come to the Delaware beaches because of the presence of offshore oil platforms and a bunch of people indicated a negative sentiment, basically saying, 'I will still come to the beach but you've taken a bunch of the fun out of it.' This negative

sentiment is important from a consumer welfare perspective. If you go somewhere and you don't like it, that's a real loss to society."

More information: Jacob R. Fooks et al. Continuous attribute values in a simulation environment: Offshore energy production and Mid-Atlantic beach visitation, *Energy Policy* (2017). DOI: 10.1016/j.enpol.2017.08.005

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