

US approves seismic tests despite dolphin, whale concerns

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The US government Friday took a big step toward opening oil and gas drilling in the Atlantic ocean by approving seismic airgun tests that

experts warn are harmful to dolphins and whales.

Last year, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to expand offshore drilling, and ordered [federal agencies](#) to fast track permits for seismic airgun blasting.

Environmental groups have staunchly opposed the use of seismic airgun blasting, which research has shown can cause loud, far-traveling noise in the ocean that disrupts [marine life](#), including fish and sea turtles.

The latest move would open a vast offshore area from New Jersey to Florida to underwater mapping for fossil fuel exploration, for the first time in decades.

"This action flies in the face of massive opposition to [offshore drilling](#) and exploration from over 90 percent of coastal municipalities in the proposed blast zone," said Diane Hoskins, campaign director at Oceana, an advocacy group.

"These permits were already denied because of the known harm that seismic airgun blasting causes."

Last year, the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management denied a series of applications for seismic blasting, saying the "value of obtaining the geophysical and geological information from new airgun seismic surveys in the Atlantic does not outweigh the potential risks of those surveys' acoustic pulse impacts on marine life."

The same agency issued a report several years ago that found airgun blasts could injure as many as 138,000 marine mammals, including dolphins and whales.

Airguns are toed underwater by boats and repeat loud blasts every 10-12

seconds, sometimes for months at a time, and a single ship may tow up to 96 airguns, Oceana says.

'Incidentally' harass marine mammals

The announcement by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries department authorizes five companies to "incidentally, but not intentionally, harass marine mammals" as they "conduct geophysical surveys in support of hydrocarbon exploration in the Atlantic Ocean."

The actual permits for drilling offshore would be issued by a separate government office, the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management. Those permits have not yet been issued.

NOAA experts said their decision allowed for geographical limits on where airgun blasting could take place, would offer protections for endangered right whales, and did not explicitly allow for the killing of any marine mammals.

While Benjamin Laws, a biologist at the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, acknowledged that seismic blasting could have "effects" on marine life, he said during a conference call with reporters: "Our analysis shows we shouldn't expect there would be impacts greater than negligible on annual rates of recruitment or survival for these populations."

Jolie Harrison, chief of the Permits and Conservation Division in the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, added: "We really went to great lengths here to make sure that we understood what the effects are."

Extra steps by exploration operations are to include visual and acoustic

monitoring to detect [marine mammal](#) sounds underwater before seismic blasts can begin.

NOAA also said its approval requires third-party observers to ride on geophysical survey vessels "to listen and watch for marine life and alert operators if a [protected species](#) comes within a certain distance."

A NOAA spokeswoman said commercial operators would have to contract with third party observers, and "the observers have the authority to call for a shutdown when required."

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