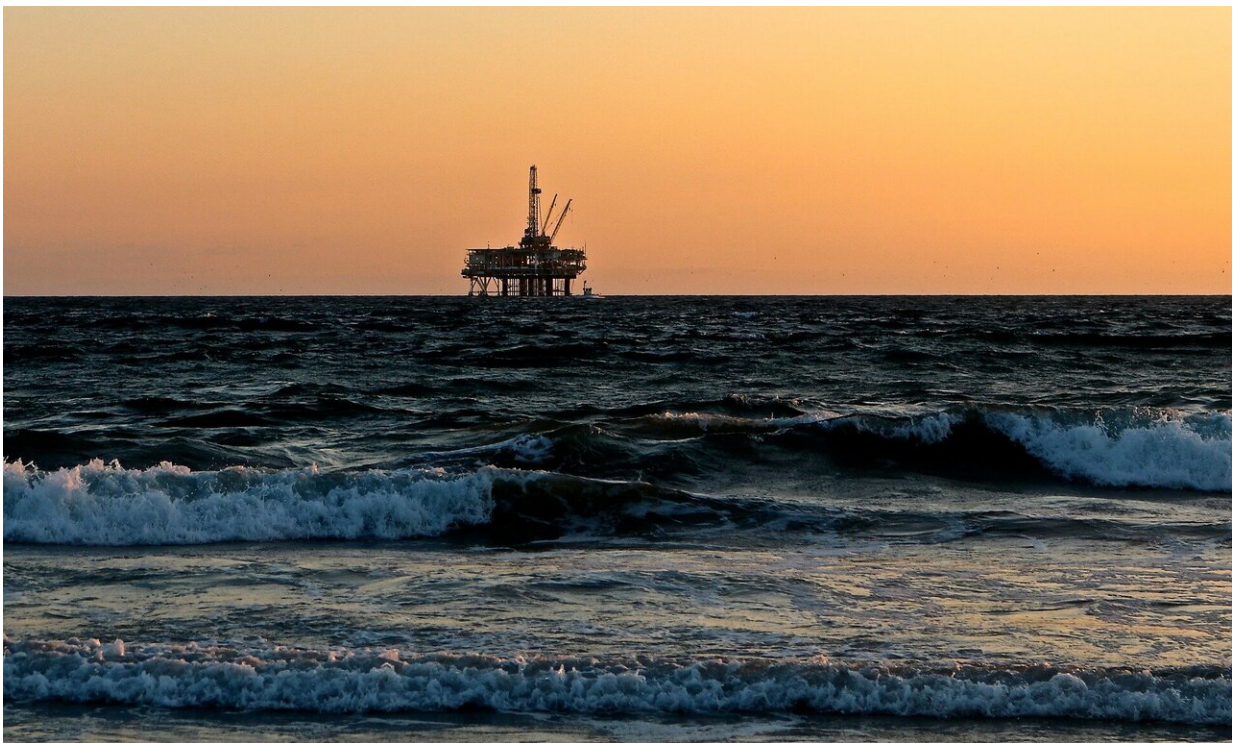


Oil drilling 150 miles off Florida's coast prompts dire warning from members of Congress

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Exploratory drilling began this week for an offshore oil well just 150 miles from South Florida, prompting a warning from 18 members of Congress, including the entire South Florida delegation, of the potential

for "severe, even catastrophic, impact" if a spill occurs.

The well, operated by the British-owned Bahamas Petroleum Company under a license from the Bahamian government, will be drilled as deep as 18,000 feet in an area southwest of Andros Island. It is believed to be the only active well in the region, although the status of oil fields nearby in Cuban waters is unclear.

The drilling prompted an urgent letter from the 18 Congress members to Hubert Minnis, prime minister of the Bahamas, urging him to reconsider the quest for oil.

"It has become clear that oil companies such as BPC have every intention to plow ahead despite red flags, which warn of the grave health, natural disaster, and environmental risks of drilling," the letter to Minnis said.

Even a minor accident that leads to a small oil spill could cost millions of dollars to Florida and disrupt tourism and businesses.

Proponents of the drilling say the process is closely regulated and accidents are rare.

"The way that they're drilling today I think it's perfectly safe," said Ned Bowman, executive director of the Florida Petroleum Marketers Association. "We're the most regulated industry in the world and I think you've got so many wells that are out there ... if you look at that whole concept and how safe the industry is, I don't have an issue with it."

A spokesman for Bahamas Petroleum said the drilling that started this week is for an exploratory well and no oil was being extracted.

But Floridians have scarred memories over another exploratory well that

led to one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S history. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico dumped an estimated 164 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and caused billions of dollars in economic and [environmental damage](#) along the entire Gulf Coast from Louisiana to the Florida Keys.

Horizon was drilling far deeper than the well in the Bahamas. But in 1979, an accident at the much more shallow exploratory well Ixtoc I near Mexico's Bay of Campeche dumped an estimated 147 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

The letter to Minnis cites the Deepwater Horizon disaster as a cautionary tale for drilling in the pristine tropical Atlantic waters.

"Should BPC's project move forward, we will be justified in fearing that the Atlantic coast is at risk of severe, even catastrophic, impact from any spills that might occur—essentially undermining the recent offshore drilling ban extension from President Trump, and future offshore drilling restrictions," the letter said. "It is unclear whether BPC has the capacity to help mitigate a serious disaster, let alone prevent one in the first place."

The letter—signed by U.S. Reps. Alcee Hastings, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, Ted Deutch, Charlie Crist, Lois Frankel, Debbie Mucarsel-Powell and others—also claims that the drilling ship, the Stena IceMax, has a history of safety issues.

Minnis has said he is "totally against" drilling but that his hands are tied because the commitment to allow the exploratory well has already been signed.

Casuarina McKinney-Lambert, executive director of the Bahamas Reef Environment Educational Foundation, said that although the well is

being drilled in Bahamian waters, the impacts of a spill could spread well beyond the Bahamas.

The delicate areas of the Florida Keys would be particularly vulnerable to a spill, McKinney-Lambert said.

"We're also concerned about impacts to the protected areas in Cuba, which obviously are the spawning grounds for a lot of spiny lobster and crawfish that end up in the Florida keys that are very valuable there and for Bahamian fisherman in the great Bahama bank," McKinney-Lambert said. "And we're also concerned about potential impacts to Florida and to Florida beaches."

She said that even if Florida's beaches escape direct damage from an oil spill, tourists could be inclined to steer clear of the area, anyway. She cited her family's AirBnB property on the Bahamian island of Eleuthera, which saw many cancelations after Hurricane Dorian, despite being 150 miles from the damaged areas.

"The electricity didn't even go out (in Eleuthera)," McKinney-Lambert said, "so there's issues of reputational damage to the whole region potentially that I don't think that have adequately considered."

Despite the warnings, Ivonne MacMillan, spokesperson for the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, said none of its members have yet raised concerns.

Although Bahamas Petroleum officials would not comment, their documentation on the well cite says it is not located in a marine protected area and is remote from regular Bahamian fishing and tourism industries. It also says the [drilling](#) "adhered to all applicable Bahamian laws, and over and above this adhered to all applicable guidelines, international standards and best practices."

The company touted the potential financial benefits to the Bahamas, estimating \$5 billion in tax revenues if the wells are successful.

McKinney-Lambert said that although the economic possibilities could indeed be transformative for the island nation, there's a down side.

"We agree this would be transformative," she said, "but not in the way that we would like it to be. Because we are so dependent on tourism. The majority of our population is employed directly or indirectly in tourism, and this jeopardizes it."

Drilling for the well is expected to take 60 days, Bahamas Petroleum said in presentation material about the project. The well will be sealed and never used again.

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