

ISSUE BRIEF

# KEEP AMERICA'S ATLANTIC AND ARCTIC OCEANS OIL-FREE

America's oceans sustain life, not only for the vast array of marine species that inhabit their deep waters and coasts, but for all of us. The Atlantic Ocean provides sustainable seafood, and its coastal communities thrive thanks to clean and healthy oceans and beaches. The Arctic Ocean, one of our last truly wild places, not only supports a vast array of unique wildlife, but helps to regulate the climate. All Americans benefit directly from the permanent protections now in place against offshore drilling in the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans keeping publicly owned fossil fuels safely under the sea. These special ocean areas deserve to be protected from dirty and dangerous offshore oil drilling that threatens ocean health, coastal residents, public health, and the climate. An oil spill would devastate coastal communities and ocean and coastal wildlife. And opening up vast new areas to offshore oil drilling would lock America into a future of dirty fuels. We must continue to fight attempts by the oil industry to open these oceans to drilling, and instead invest in the clean, renewable energy that will protect our life-giving oceans, the communities that rely on them, and our climate.

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Gulf oil spill, 2010.

Americans of all political stripes show a significant preference for investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency over traditional dirty energy sources such as offshore drilling.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, 67 percent of new power generation capacity was from renewable sources like wind and solar.<sup>2</sup> Protecting and preserving our Arctic and Atlantic waters embraces that promise of a clean energy future. Building on a legacy of protecting our oceans and our climate, President Obama used his authority under the

Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to permanently protect most of the Arctic Ocean in a joint action with Canada, and 31 submarine canyons in the Atlantic Ocean (stretching from offshore of the Chesapeake Bay to the Canadian border) from the danger and destruction of oil and gas drilling.<sup>3</sup>

While the fossil fuel industry and its allies in government are unlikely to abandon their quest to expand ocean drilling, Americans support protecting these oceans and oppose turning these public resources over to private oil companies.<sup>4</sup> More than 1.4 million public comments opposing offshore drilling were submitted to the Obama administration, and thousands of Atlantic coast communities, businesses, and municipalities have declared their opposition to drilling and seismic testing. Veterans have spoken out on the security risks of Arctic drilling and climate change, and a host of environmental, Latino, and faith-based leaders, public policy organizations, and voter education organizations such as the League of Women Voters have called for permanent protection of these vibrant, oil-free waters that belong to all Americans.<sup>5</sup>

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## ATLANTIC OCEAN: WHAT'S PROTECTED AND WHAT'S AT RISK

There is a chain of deep sea canyons that stretch from New England to offshore of the Chesapeake Bay, covering nearly 4 million acres. These canyons teem with life, including vivid deep sea corals, whales, sea turtles, fish, and seabirds, as well as new and rare marine species. Protecting these canyons from ocean drilling—as well as from the continued threat of powerful air guns that can injure or kill whales that rely on sound to find food and mates—will help ensure that they continue to serve as major biodiversity hotspots and contribute to the Atlantic's abundant fisheries and wildlife. Protecting these areas offers security to the ocean economies that depend on clean oceans and coasts. The Mid-Atlantic coast generates more than \$29 billion annually from ocean-related tourism, recreation, and fishing.<sup>6</sup>

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However, the South Atlantic coast is still at risk. From Virginia, south, as far as Georgia or even Florida, the potential for offshore oil and gas drilling remains, threatening the livelihoods of commercial and recreational fisherman, and small businesses that rely on clean and healthy oceans and beaches. The BP Gulf oil disaster affected more than 1,000 miles

of coastline. An equivalent disaster in the Atlantic could coat beaches from Savannah to Boston. All along the East Coast, many of America's most beloved beaches would be vulnerable to an oil spill.

Opening the South Atlantic coast to offshore drilling would sacrifice economies, coastlines, and fragile marine and coastal environments. In 2014, the South Atlantic seafood industry supported more than 90,000 jobs; fisherman landed more than 105 million pounds of fish and earned more than \$184 million for their catch.<sup>7</sup> Ocean tourism and recreational industries generated more than \$13 billion in 2013.<sup>8</sup> In addition, this region is home to important and sensitive marine species, including endangered whales. Putting all of this at risk, while at the same time generating large amounts of heat-trapping carbon pollution, is not in America's best interest.

## ARCTIC OCEAN: BEAUFORT AND CHUKCHI SEA

The Arctic Ocean is a crown jewel in America's national heritage, our last essentially pristine ocean. It's western half, the Chukchi Sea, features a rich feeding ground critical to millions of animals, including the U.S. walrus population, polar bears, belugas, and ice seals. To the east, the Beaufort Sea's coastline is the number one land denning site for female polar bears in the U.S. Arctic. Endangered bowheads and many other whales migrate through the area. Introducing the risk of massive industrial activity into this region would put many of these animals in peril. An oil spill in the midst of these creatures would be devastating.



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Not to mention, the Arctic is already facing severe threats from climate change, and new offshore drilling would only compound this problem.

The only safe Arctic Ocean drilling is no drilling at all. The Arctic is a rugged and forbidding environment. The ocean is covered in ice much of the year, shrouded in fog and darkness, and located 1,000 miles away from the nearest Coast Guard base. No matter how prepared an oil company claims to be, no one can master these punishing conditions. Shell Oil ceased explorations after a seven-year, \$7 billion campaign to drill in the Arctic produced little more than a well not worth pursuing, a totaled drill rig, and massive public opposition.<sup>9</sup>



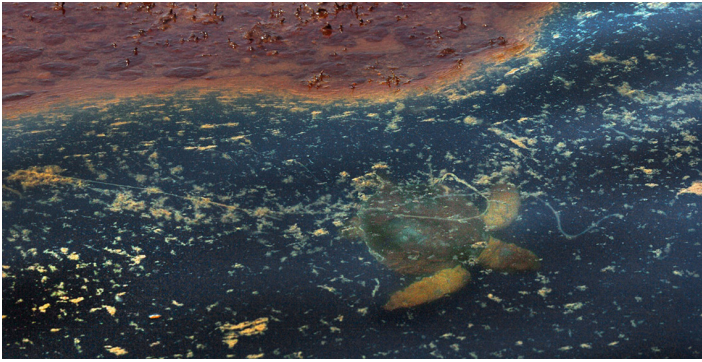
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## CLEAN—NOT DIRTY—ENERGY MUST POWER OUR FUTURE

Permanently protecting areas in the Atlantic and Arctic oceans from drilling benefits Americans across the country by preserving our public waters from the harms and health hazards that come with offshore oil and gas extraction. These special oceans—and indeed all U.S. federal waters—are held in trust for the benefit of all Americans. Permanent protections eliminate the threat of pollution, habitat loss, and degradation of our ocean heritage.

And, just as important, Americans don't want to be stuck with fossil fuels and the impacts of a warming world. Oil production in these oceans—if feasible at all—would take decades to bring on line. Leasing these waters today for production 30 years from now ignores our international commitments and the scientific evidence that we must transition America to a clean energy future as rapidly as possible.





Sea turtle in oiled water.

## THE DIRTY AND DANGEROUS REALITY OF OCEAN DRILLING

The South Atlantic is still at risk of new ocean drilling. We need only to look at the Gulf of Mexico to understand just how dirty and dangerous ocean drilling is. On April 20, 2010, BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers, injuring 17 others, and initiating one of the worst environmental disasters in America's history. The ecological and economic fallout of this catastrophe was immense, and the harm will last for generations.<sup>10</sup>

### ECONOMIC IMPACTS

- More than \$62 billion has been (or will be) paid by BP, Halliburton, and Transocean to address the clean-up, damages, penalties, and environmental restoration required as a result of the Deepwater Horizon disaster.<sup>11</sup>
- The spill cost the public more than 16 million user days for outdoor recreation such as boating, recreational fishing, and beach-going. Total recreational use damages due to the spill are estimated at \$693.2 million.<sup>12</sup>
- The Gulf of Mexico commercial fishing industry lost an estimated \$247 million as a result of post-spill fishery closures.<sup>13</sup>

### ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS

- The oil spill contaminated more than 1,300 miles of coastline, at least 3,200 square miles of the deep ocean floor, and 57,000 square miles of surface water. Some 22,000 tons of oil washed up on the shores of the Gulf Coast.<sup>14</sup>
- Nearly 1 million coastal and offshore seabirds are estimated to have died as a result of the oil spill.<sup>15</sup>
- Tens of thousands of dolphins and whales were exposed to the oil spill. Endangered sperm whales suffered a 7 percent decline in population, and the Gulf's resident Bryde's whale population, estimated at less than 40 whales, experienced a 22 percent decline in population. Recovery of this population is highly uncertain.<sup>16</sup>
- Up to 8.3 billion oysters, representing 508 million pounds of fresh oyster meat, were killed. Low oyster densities and the loss of oyster habitat have imperiled the Gulf oyster population, which is not expected to recover without substantive restoration.<sup>17</sup>



The effects of offshore drilling are not limited to catastrophes like the BP oil spill. Louisiana loses a football field's worth of wetlands every 45 minutes due largely to the infrastructure of pipelines and canals necessary to support offshore drilling.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, around 1,500 small oil spills are reported in Louisiana each year, spilling an average of 330,000 gallons annually.<sup>19</sup> And in the Arctic, even onshore drilling results in more than 500 spills annually.<sup>20</sup>

## THE RISK OF ANOTHER DISASTER IS REAL

Despite the 2010 BP oil disaster, adequate safety reforms have never been implemented, and even the progress that has been made is at risk. In the event of an oil spill, strict liability of the offending company for economic and environmental damages remains staggeringly low at just \$134 million,<sup>21</sup> with taxpayers on the hook for all additional damages. Furthermore, safety experts assert that technological advances that allow drilling in deeper and harsher conditions have vastly outpaced the safety advances critical to limiting the risk of catastrophic oil spills.<sup>22</sup>

- **It's dirty:** Oil spill clean-up operations are rarely capable of recovering or treating more than a small portion of the oil spilled. Even when human error and technology are not at fault, storms can cause structural damages that lead to devastating spills. During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, 540 individual spills released 11 million gallons of oil—the same amount released by the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989.<sup>23</sup>
- **It's dangerous:** From 2003 to 2010, 128 workers died in activities related to offshore oil and gas operations in the United States alone, an average of 16 per year.<sup>24</sup>

## SOLUTIONS

- **End unsustainable fossil fuel development:** The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world's authoritative scientific review body on climate change, warned that all unproven reserves of oil, gas, and coal (including the oil and gas in the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans) will have to be left undeveloped if the world is to limit global warming to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit—the ceiling for avoiding the worst consequences.<sup>25</sup> The oil industry claims that Arctic and Atlantic oil may be needed over

the next 30 years,<sup>26</sup> but this assumes continued oil-dependence scenarios that the International Energy Agency says will result in three times the global warming the planet can sustain, and also assumes no technological innovations or policies are enacted to further cut demand.<sup>27</sup>

- Focus on fuel efficiency: Improving energy efficiency is the cheapest, cleanest, and quickest way to meet our energy needs. Focusing on fuel efficiency and other oil-saving measures could save nearly 4 billion barrels of oil annually by 2035.<sup>28</sup> Notably, that's almost the

same amount of oil, in a single year, that the Interior Department estimates can ever be recovered from drilling all our offshore waters from Florida to Maine.<sup>29</sup> And in half a dozen years, it would rival optimistic estimates of all recoverable oil in our Arctic Ocean.

- Invest in offshore renewable energy: Offshore wind resources are abundant. In the Atlantic, modest development of offshore wind could create about 91,000 more jobs than offshore drilling, and in just 13 years, offshore wind could provide more energy than could be provided by drilling known reserves.<sup>30</sup>

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