

OFFSHORE DRILLING THREATENS OUR MARINE ECOSYSTEM



Photography of Oil rig by photographer *Erik Nielsen* on Flickr.

Offshore Oil Drilling Threatens Our Environment, Our Economy, and Our Way of Life

The coastal waters between Cambria and Point Conception boast a stunning diverse marine ecosystem. This ocean region is home to kelp forests, gray whale migration routes, and one of the most sustainable fisheries in the country. Yet major threats leave this delicate ecosystem hanging in the balance, including the threats posed by offshore oil and gas drilling. That is why Sierra Club is working with local partners to permanently protect this area from drilling and promote management practices based on the best available science to preserve our unique marine environment.

An oil spill in our waters would be devastating to the local economy. The Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico cost the fishing industry, and fishing dependent industries, nearly **\$144 million**.^[1] This is comparable to losses from previous oil spills – the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska cost the commercial fishing industry **\$136.5 million in 1989 alone**.^[2]

Local residents and commercial fishermen across the country have witnessed firsthand the adverse effects of oil spills: ranging from decimation of the Alaskan herring fishery, to widespread genetic mutations, such as shrimp without eyes and crabs without claws, disruption of fish spawning, and unusually high occurrences of whale and dolphin strandings. Researchers at the University of South Florida who studied the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster on Gulf fish found lesions on 20 percent of fish in many study locations – an increase of 200 percent from before the oil disaster.^[3]

Known Unknowns

Known threats posed by oil leaks and spills could be compounded by the use of dispersants to clean up oil on the surface and underwater. The Obama Administration and Coast Guard are requiring BP to implement a sampling and monitoring plan to determine the unknown short- and long-term effects of dispersants on marine life.^[4]

Day-to-day Operations Could Create Conflicts with Commercial Fishermen

Oil and gas drilling would conflict with San Luis Obispo's fishing heritage not only in the event of a spill, but in its day-to-day operations. A government study of drilling's impacts on fishing operations found:

- "Some exploration, development, and production activities have a potential to result in space-use conflicts with commercial fishing activities. Commercial fishing vessels could be **excluded from normal fishing grounds to avoid the potential for gear loss**."
- "Offshore construction of platforms could infringe on commercial fishing activities by **excluding commercial fishing from adjacent areas due to safety considerations**."
- "Fishing activities could be temporarily excluded from some areas during construction of offshore pipelines. Once pipelines are put into place, they **could result in entanglement hazards for some types of fishing gear**..."^[5]



Photography of BP Oil Disaster (left & right image) by photographer Julie Dermansky for the Sierra Club.

It Could Happen Here

According to the New Times, the federal agency responsible for managing the United States' offshore oil and gas resources "has already marked out a grid of potential lease blocks in federal waters off San Luis Obispo County's coast. [6]

Although the Obama Administration's latest five-year plan for offshore leasing does not include any Pacific leases, the Western States Petroleum Association (WSPA) is committed to continue pushing for new oil leases off the California coast. Following the Administration's decision, WSPA wrote on its blog that, "We hope the Administration ... will reconsider its decision to exclude ... development of energy resources off the California coast." [7] The oil industry spends millions of dollars lobbying decision makers in Sacramento and Washington, to backs up these statements and push their drilling agenda.

With big money against us and uncertainty about future leases, we cannot afford to wait. The time is now to protect the California coast from oil drilling.

We Can Permanently Protect the Central Coast

Exploring for, developing, or producing oil, gas, or minerals is prohibited in all of America's national marine sanctuaries. These activities are known to have harmful impacts on marine life, disrupt ecosystem functions, and interrupt local fishing operations. The stakes are too high to allow politicians and oil companies to gamble with our coast. National Marine Sanctuary designation would permanently protect our coast from dangerous oil and gas drilling.

A national marine sanctuary would put this and other important decisions about the future of our coast into the hands of our local community. Each sanctuary is advised by a Sanctuary Advisory Council which is comprised of government experts, local commercial and recreational user groups, conservation and public interest organizations, scientific and educational organizations, and members of the general public. Together, these local stakeholders advise the Sanctuary Manager on the management and protection of the sanctuary, and assist the National Marine Sanctuary Program in guiding a proposed site through the designation process.

For more information about the threats of offshore oil, and our campaign to create a central coast sanctuary, visit <http://sierraclubcalifornia.org/campaigns/resilient-habitats/the-campaign/central-coast-nms/>.

[1] Greater New Orleans Inc. "A Study of the Economic Impact of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill." Retrieved July 6, 2012. <http://gnoinc.org/wp-content/uploads/Economic_Impact_Study_Part_I_-_Full_Report.pdf>.

[2] Melanie Dorsett. "Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Continued Effects On The Alaskan Economy." Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal. Volume 1, Article 7: October 20, 2010.

[3] Dahr Jamail. "Gulf seafood deformities alarm scientists - Features". Al Jazeera English. Retrieved 2012-06-01. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/04/201241682318260912.html>

[4] United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Response to the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico: Questions and Answers on Dispersants." Last updated on Friday, October 14, 2011. <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill/dispersants-qanda.html#effects2>

[5] Zeke Grader. "Threats to Fisheries of Offshore Oil Development Remains." Pacific Coast Federations of Fishermen's Associations: Fishermen's News, April 2009. <http://www.pcffa.org/fn-apr09.htm>

[6] Kathy Jonston. "Drill, spill, or chill baby: Are offshore oil rigs on our horizon." New Times: Volume 24, Issue 43. March 26, 2010. <http://www.newtimeslo.com/cover/4455/drill-spill-or-chill-baby/>

[7] Western States Petroleum Association. "Offshore Oil- Obama." November 25, 2010. <http://www.wspa.org/blog/index.php/wspa-message/offshore-oil-obama/>