

Fernandina Beach says no to seismic air gun testing in the Atlantic Ocean

Submitted by **Suanne Z. Thamm**

Reporter – News Analyst

December 4, 2014 5:54 p.m.



More information at OCEANA.ORG
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At the instigation of Commissioner Johnny Miller, the Fernandina Beach City Commission (FBCC) extended an invitation to Erin Handy of Oceana to address them at their December 2, 2014 Regular Meeting on the topic of seismic air gun testing in Atlantic waters off the east coast of the United States.

Founded in 2001, Oceana is the largest international organization focused solely on ocean conservation. They are currently directing efforts to persuade the Secretary of the Interior not to allow seismic air gun testing off the Eastern Seashore as a means to explore for oil and gas reserves. In 1982 the Atlantic was declared off limits to oil exploration. But in 2014 the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) received administration approval to open the Atlantic to seismic testing for oil and gas. It has been estimated that as much as 3.3 billion barrels of oil (less than a 6-month supply for the nation) may be found in the mid and south Atlantic off the US coast. The current BOEM 5-Year Plan can then be reviewed in 2017 for potential drilling if the seismic air

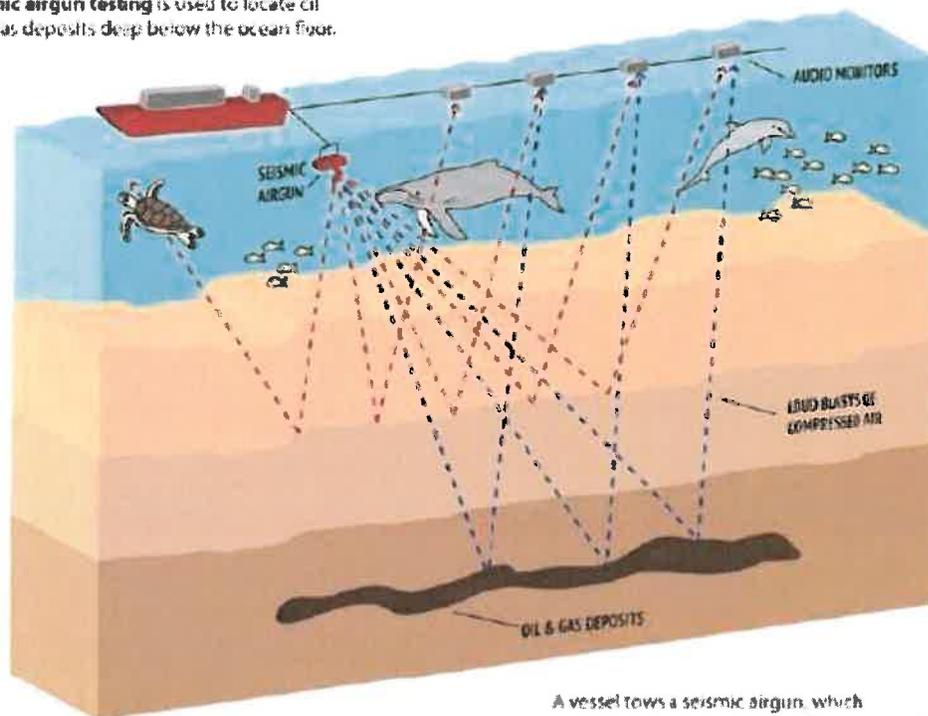
gun testing shows promising results. To date, nine companies have submitted applications for permits. Seismic air gun blasting could take place in the Atlantic, including off the Florida coast, as early as 2015.



SEISMIC AIRGUN TESTING IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

HOW IT WORKS

Seismic airgun testing is used to locate oil and gas deposits deep below the ocean floor.



A vessel tows a seismic airgun, which shoots extremely loud blasts of compressed air through the ocean and miles under the seafloor, every ten seconds, 24 hours a day, for days to weeks on end.

The air guns release blasts every 10 seconds, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for weeks and months at a time. Different companies can conduct blasting in the same area again and again. The impact on marine mammals from such testing is significant. It disrupts mating and feeding habits, causes abandonment of habitat and temporary and permanent hearing loss, among other issues. It also adversely impacts the fishing and

tourist industries. Handy emphasized the effects on the right whale breeding grounds right off Fernandina Beach.

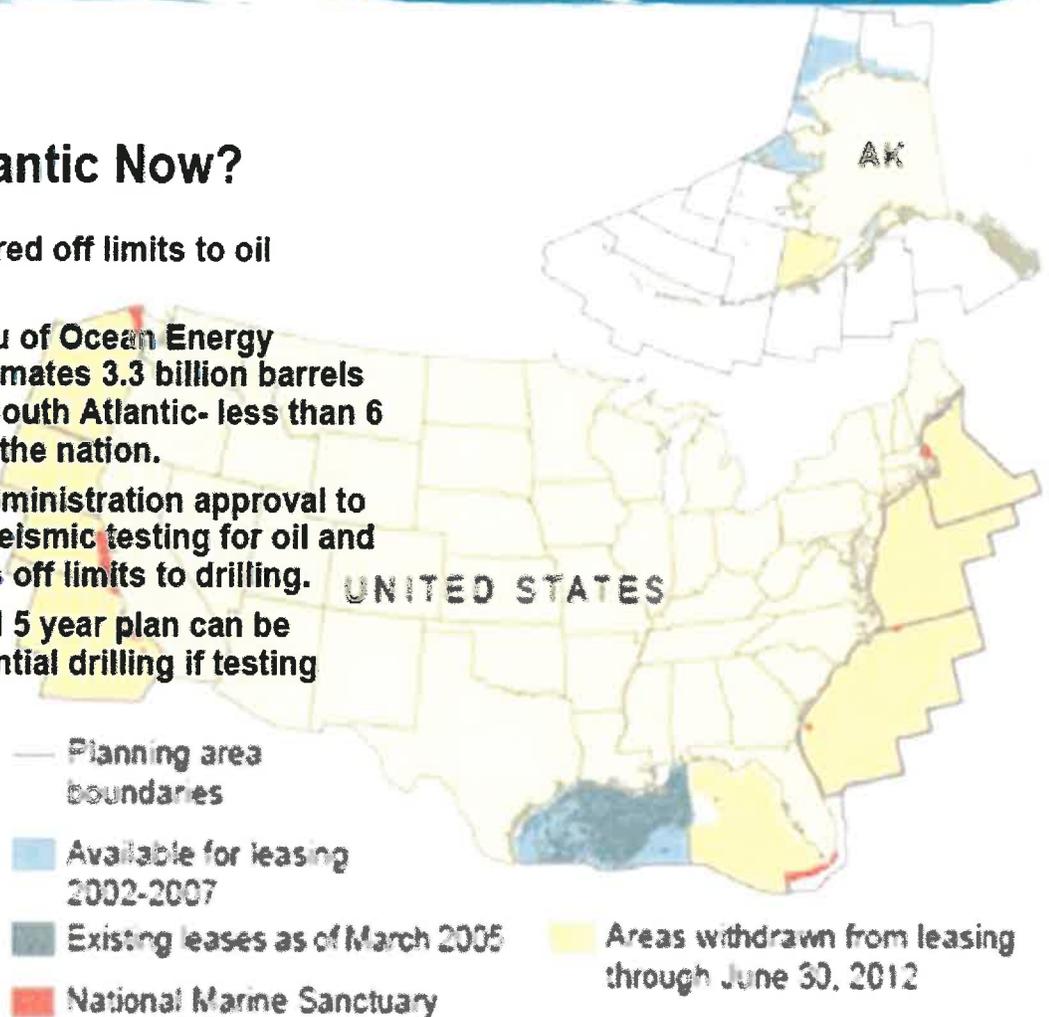
Why the Atlantic Now?

1982- Atlantic declared off limits to oil exploration.

2011- BOEM (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management) estimates 3.3 billion barrels of oil in mid and south Atlantic- less than 6 month supply for the nation.

2014- BOEM gets administration approval to open Atlantic to seismic testing for oil and gas. Area remains off limits to drilling.

2017- Current BOEM 5 year plan can be reviewed for potential drilling if testing shows potential.

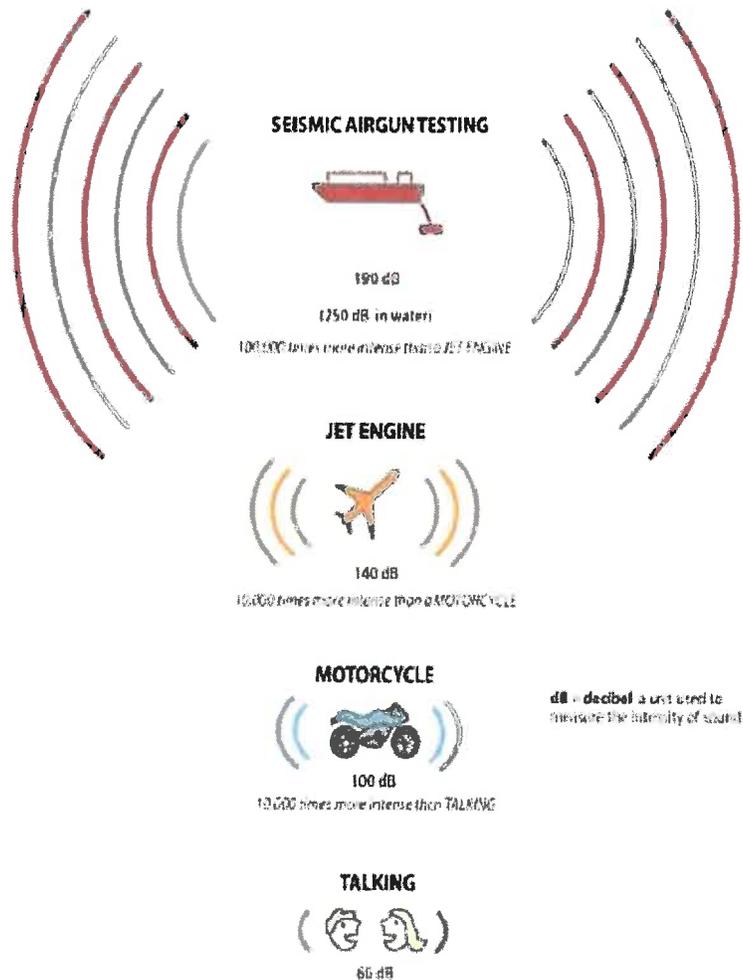


Handy advised commissioners and the audience that the Secretary of the Interior has stated that she will take Governors' and state officials' opinions into consideration. Oceana is urging coastal residents to speak out individually and through their elected officials on the environmental and economic objections to seismic air gun testing. Their goal is to get 50% of the towns in each congressional district to sign letters of resolution opposing seismic air gun blasting in the Atlantic.

HOW LOUD IT IS

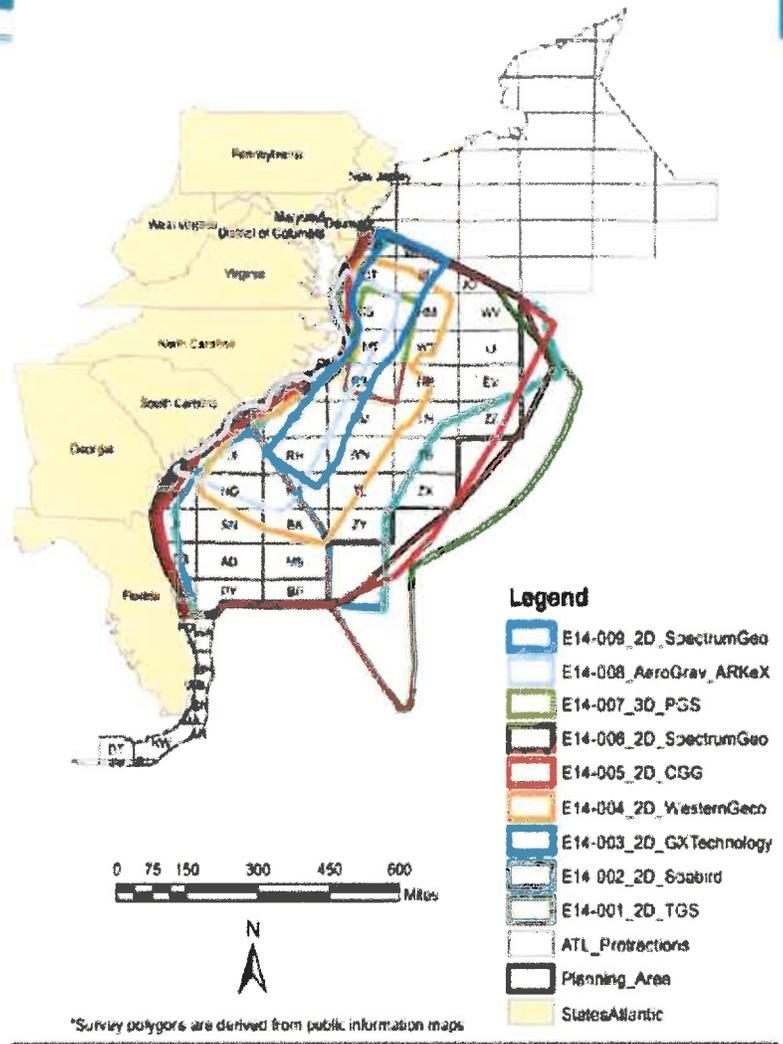
How loud is a seismic air gun blast?

- Loud enough to penetrate several miles into the sea floor
- 190 decibels (air), 250 decibels (water)
 - Humans can go deaf at 140 decibels
- 100,000 times louder than a jet plane.
- Imagine a dynamite blast outside your house every 10 seconds.



Commissioner Miller informed commissioners that he had experienced some of these low-frequency sounds emitted by seismic air guns while in the Navy, and that they are “super loud.”

Current BOEM permit applications to conduct seismic air gun testing in the mid and south Atlantic.



Commissioner Pat Gas moved and Vice Mayor Sarah Pelican seconded Resolution 2014-168 opposing seismic air gun testing in the Atlantic Ocean. The motion passed with unanimous support.

26 Coastal towns and 200 elected officials have signed letters of resolution opposing seismic air gun blasting in the Atlantic.

- Atlantic Beach
 - St. Augustine
 - Cocoa Beach
 - Cape Canaveral
 - Satellite Beach
 - Melbourne Beach
 - Marco Island
 - St. Petersburg
- Fernandina Beach- proposed
GOAL: 50% of towns
in each congressional
district.



For additional information on seismic air gun testing and Oceana, visit Oceana's website oceana.org/en or contact Erin Handy at (904) 885-1348 or ehandy@oceana.org.

Editor's Note: Suanne Z. Thamm is a native of Chautauqua County, NY, who moved to Fernandina Beach from Alexandria, VA, in 1994. As a long time city resident and city watcher, she provides interesting insight into the many issues that impact our city. We are grateful for Suanne's many contributions to the Fernandina Observer.

Should we blast Atlantic with air guns to map oil drilling potential?

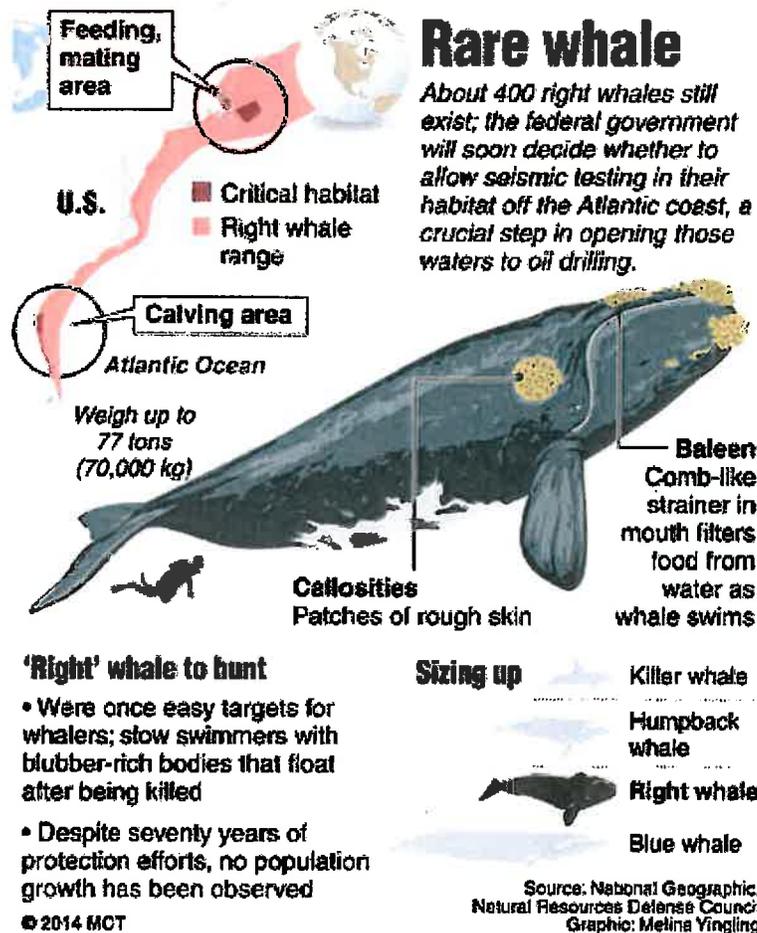
By Sean Cockerham/McClatchyDC

January 10, 2014



A study of what the controversial seismic tests would do to whales, dolphins and fish is on track for release at the end of February, an Interior Department official told lawmakers on Friday. Pictured is a North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*).

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES — NOAA/MCT



WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is nearing a decision on allowing seismic testing off the Atlantic Coast, a critical step in opening waters off Virginia, the Carolinas and elsewhere to oil drilling.

A study of what the controversial seismic tests would do to whales, dolphins and fish is on track for release at the end of February, an Interior Department official told lawmakers Friday. The proposal received more than 55,000 public comments.

The tests are being considered from Delaware to Florida’s Cape Canaveral, although most of the push for offshore drilling is in the areas off North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. Walter Cruickshank, deputy director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, said the tests would reveal just how much oil and natural gas lies in the nation’s mid and south Atlantic.

“The existing information was acquired decades ago with now-outdated technology,” Cruickshank told the House energy subcommittee.

The federal government estimates 3.3 billion barrels of oil and 31.28 trillion cubic feet of natural gas along the entire Atlantic seabed. That’s hardly the makings of a boom, and it’s nine times smaller than estimated oil reserves off the Arctic coast of Alaska. But the Atlantic estimates from

the 1970s and 1980s are no doubt conservative, said James Knapp, a professor of earth and ocean sciences at the University of South Carolina, who also testified Friday. Modern seismic tests would provide a far better picture, he said.

There's contention over allowing the tests, though. The process involves vessels towing an array of seismic air guns that blast compressed air underwater, sending intense sound waves to the bottom of the ocean. The booms are repeated every 10 seconds or so for days or weeks, with their echoes used to map the location of the subsea oil and gas deposits.

No environmental groups were invited to testify at Friday's House of Representatives hearing on air guns, chaired by Rep. Doug Lamborn, a Republican drilling supporter from Colorado. But Oceana campaign director Claire Douglass said in an email that air gun blasts 100,000 times more intense than a jet engine pose threats to marine mammals, including the endangered right whale.

"These dynamite-like blasts can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss, which can seriously harm animals that depend on their hearing for critical life-sustaining behaviors such as feeding, mating and communicating," Douglass wrote.

Some 50 members of Congress, including a few Republicans, are also opposing the tests and have sent letters to President Barack Obama suggesting that the Department of Interior's own estimates indicate that up to 138,500 marine mammals could be injured.

The oil industry and members of Congress who support seismic testing said the fears of harm are overblown. They said care is taken to protect the marine mammals, and that the process is routine in Canada and the Gulf of Mexico. There has been debate in the Gulf of Mexico, though, where the oil industry, environmental groups and government agencies settled a lawsuit last summer by putting some areas off limits to air gun testing for 30 months while environmental studies are conducted.

Knapp, of the University of South Carolina's department of earth and ocean sciences, said the seismic testing offers a "truly historic opportunity" to evaluate the energy potential of the Atlantic, where oil drilling has been blocked for decades.

"I see no reason why we couldn't conduct those surveys in a safe and effective manner," he told the congressional subcommittee.

Politicians and the oil industry are pushing hard for the president to open up the Atlantic waters to oil drilling, with the industry's main trade group suggesting the most economic potential for revenue and jobs lies in North Carolina, followed by South Carolina and then Virginia.

The governors of those states all support drilling off their coasts. The Obama administration will focus next year on deciding whether to including Atlantic drilling in the next federal offshore leasing plan, which runs from 2017 through 2022.

Email: scockerham@mcclatchydc.com; Twitter: [@seancockerham](https://twitter.com/seancockerham)

Oppose seismic airgun tests off our coastal areas

point of view

Neil Armington

Imagine that an extremely loud sound is filling your living room.

The noise is constant, every 16 seconds, 24 hour a day, for weeks on

end. Could you read? Communicate with your family? This isn't science fiction.

It could happen near our beaches and our coastal waters.

The oil and gas industry want to map oil and gas reserves off the Atlantic coast. To do that, it needs seismic airgun testing.

A vessel tows a seismic airgun, which shoots extremely loud blasts of compressed air many times more intense than a jet engine through the ocean and miles under the seafloor.

The proposed tests will cause destructive impacts to marine wildlife, coastal ecosystems, and beachside communities.

Currently, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is accepting public comment on a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that evaluates seismic airgun testing along 403 miles of the Atlantic coast from Delaware to Cape Canaveral, including Fernandina Beach, Jacksonville and St. Augustine.

The Area of Impact will extend from the shoreline out to 350 nautical miles encompassing 350,000 square miles. If approved, airgun testing is a precursor to opening our coasts to offshore drilling.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management estimates that airgun testing will threaten a multitude of wildlife, including marine mammals, sea turtles, pelagic fisheries and shore birds. These damages are called a "Take."

Whales, including the critically endangered Right Whale of which less than 360 remain, will suffer potential temporary and permanent hearing loss, abandonment of habitat, disruption of mating and feeding, beach strandings and death. Dolphins will endure a similar fate.

For whales and dolphins, which rely on their hearing to find food, communicate and reproduce, hearing is a matter of life and death. Hundreds of thousands of marine mammals could suffer.

Surveys offshore of heavily used beaches during the nesting season could temporarily displace breeding and nesting adult turtles and potentially disrupt time-critical activities such as hatchlings.

Airgun testing will impact fisheries. The impact area supports about 600 fish species and 108 fishing communities.

Potential impacts to fisheries from airgun blasts may include behavioral responses, masking of biologically important sounds, temporary hearing loss and physiological damage to eggs and larvae.

The damages to fisheries from airguns threaten fishing economies. In 2011, salt-water recreational anglers in the seven states adjacent to the impact area made 86 million fishing trips, and the recreational fisheries in these states are among this nation's most valuable.

The area's commercial fisheries were worth about \$432 million in 2012.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill taught us there is no such thing as clean oil and gas production. The small gain at the pump from offshore drilling is not worth the risk to our coastal economies, including tourism, recreation and fishing.

Our nation must begin to develop new sources of energy. Seismic airgun testing will just delay that process and harm wildlife, commercial and recreational fisheries, tourism and coastal recreation.

Let's protect Florida's coastal communities and the sea creatures.

Please email Gary Goeke (GGEIS@boem.gov) and ask to cancel plans for seismic airgun testing off the Atlantic coast.

Neil A. Armington of St. Augustine is the Matanzas Riverkeeper.



St. Marys, Georgia

Proclamation

Protesting Seismic Airgun Testing Along the Coast of Georgia

WHEREAS, The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) proposes seismic airgun testing along 403 miles of the Atlantic Ocean (encompassing 350,000 square miles) from Delaware Bay to Florida's Cape Canaveral; and

WHEREAS, Seismic airgun testing involves extremely loud blasts of compressed air through the ocean and miles under the seafloor; and

WHEREAS, the proposed tests will cause destructive impacts to marine wildlife, coastal ecosystems and coastal communities; and

WHEREAS, the BOEM acknowledges that seismic airgun testing will negatively impact the already critically-endangered Right Whales and result in the death, deafening, and disruption of all marine species (e.g. dolphins and sea turtles); and

WHEREAS, the estimated impacts to fisheries and commercial fishing possess the potential to cause irreparable harm to fishing economies which generates \$11.8 billion annually and supports 222,000 jobs; and

WHEREAS, because of the enormous distances sound can travel in the ocean, the dangerous noise from this activity cannot remotely be confined to the waters off individual states that encourage it. Some impacts — particularly on the great baleen whales — would extend many hundreds of miles, affecting states as far north as New England. Fish and fisheries could be affected for tens of miles around every seismic ship; and

WHEREAS, the estimated oil reserves in the testing area have not been proven sufficient to offset the potential destruction of oil spills along the Atlantic coast - the proven off-shore Atlantic reserves would be the equivalent of just over seven years' of Gulf oil.

NOW, THEREFORE, let it be proclaimed by the City of St. Marys, Georgia, that we are firmly opposed to seismic airgun testing along the Atlantic Coast.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 15th day of December, in the year of our Lord Two Thousand and Fourteen.

City of St. Marys, Georgia

By: _____
Mayor John F. Morrissey, Mayor

Attest: _____
Deborah Walker-Reed, City Clerk

A Deaf Whale is A Dead Whale

Seismic Airgun Testing for Oil and Gas
Threatens Marine Life and Coastal Economies



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following individuals who helped with this report:
Jacqueline Savitz, Michael Hirshfield, Ph.D., Elizabeth Pincumbe,
Dustin Cranor and Michael Jasny



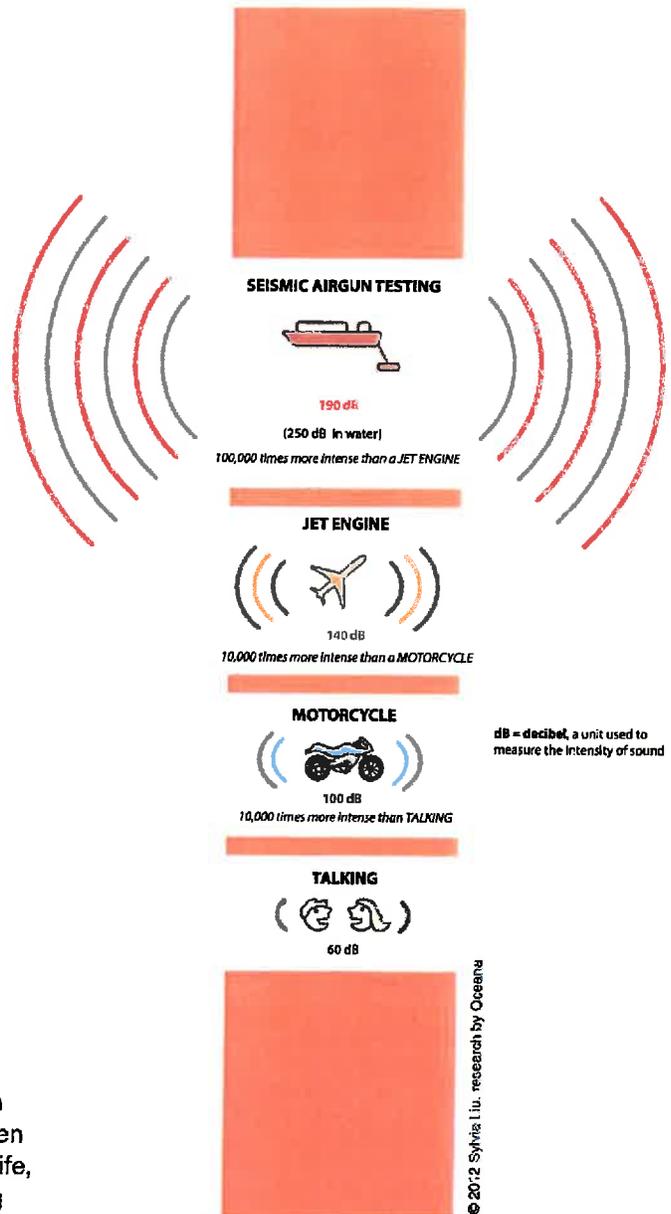
Executive Summary

According to government estimates, 138,500 whales and dolphins will soon be injured and possibly killed along the East Coast if exploration companies are allowed to use dangerous blasts of noise to search for offshore oil and gas.¹ The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) is considering allowing geophysical companies, working on behalf of oil and gas companies, to use seismic airguns to search for offshore oil and gas in the Atlantic Ocean, from Delaware to Florida. These airguns use compressed air to generate intense pulses of sound, which are 100,000 times more intense than a jet engine. These loud blasts are used on a recurring basis, going off every ten seconds, for 24 hours a day, often for weeks on end. They are so loud that they penetrate through the ocean, and miles into the seafloor, then bounce back, bringing information to the surface about the location of buried oil and gas deposits.

Airgun blasts harm whales, dolphins, sea turtles and fish. The types of impacts marine mammals may endure include temporary and permanent hearing loss, abandonment of habitat, disruption of mating and feeding, beach strandings and even death. Seismic airguns could devastate marine life, and harm fisheries and coastal economies along the Atlantic coast.

Seismic testing in the Atlantic would also be the first major step toward offshore drilling, which further harms the marine environment through leaks, oil spills, habitat destruction and greenhouse gas emissions.

This seismic testing, and all of the consequences that may ensue, are unnecessary because there cannot be any drilling in the Atlantic for at least the next five years, and oil and gas companies already own undeveloped leases on millions of acres of federal lands and waters.



Findings

This report analyzes the environmental and societal impacts of the proposed seismic testing program for the Atlantic Coast and has the following findings, which are discussed in more detail in the report.

- Airguns would be permitted in federal waters from Delaware to Florida in an area twice the size of California (330,032 square miles)² for at least eight years.
- Airgun use would cause:
 - ◆ *138,500 injuries to whales and dolphins³ and 13.5 million disturbances to vital behaviors in marine mammals such as breathing, feeding, mating and communicating.⁴*
 - ◆ *Injuries to nine critically endangered North Atlantic right whales and disruption of their critical habitat, when only roughly 500 right whales remain.⁵*
 - ◆ *Widespread displacement of whales.^{6,7}*
 - ◆ *Disruption of loggerhead sea turtles as they head to nesting beaches that are soon to be designated as critical habitats.⁸*
 - ◆ *Death of fish eggs and larvae,^{9,10,11} and*
 - ◆ *Potential disruption of fish migration and spawning.¹²*
- Airguns would be used near abundant fishing grounds, marine protected areas, national marine sanctuaries, critical habitats for endangered species, underwater canyons, migration routes for whales and dolphins, sea turtle nesting sites and essential fish habitats.
- Recent mass mortality events in Madagascar¹³ and Peru¹⁴ following seismic surveys may provide an indication of the worst case scenario for ocean life.
- The proposed use of seismic airguns and future offshore drilling along the East Coast threatens commercial and recreational fisheries, tourism and recreation. Commercial and recreational fishing off the mid- and south Atlantic generates \$11.8 billion and supports 222,000 jobs.¹⁵
- Over 500,000 marine tourism and recreation jobs are located within the blast zone.¹⁶

Recommendations

Seismic airguns pose unnecessary risks to marine mammals, sea turtles, fish and other ocean wildlife. The cumulative effects of seismic blasts repeated over large areas will disrupt critical activities and injure and kill many marine animals, including endangered species. Based on the threats of airguns to marine life and ocean resources, Oceana makes the following recommendations:

Reject Airguns

The Obama administration should deny all current proposals that incorporate airgun use and phase out the use of airguns in U.S. waters. If seismic surveying does occur, the following measures must be taken to minimize impacts on marine life:



Make Seismic Data Public

DOI should make all seismic data publically available to reduce the redundancy in seismic surveys and allow the public to be more engaged in decision-making regarding offshore drilling.

Require Alternative Technologies for Seismic Testing

If seismic testing is going to occur, DOI should require it be done using the least harmful technology available. Marine vibroseis could completely alleviate the need for airguns in three to five years. However, marine vibroseis is not a panacea and the best option continues to be a flat rejection of such activities.

Designate “No Activity Zones”

DOI should permanently close large areas to seismic surveying and drilling to protect vulnerable habitats and species. “No activity zones” must be large enough to create a buffer area between the airgun source and the protected area because airgun noise can disturb marine life from hundreds to thousands of miles away.



Support Renewable Energy

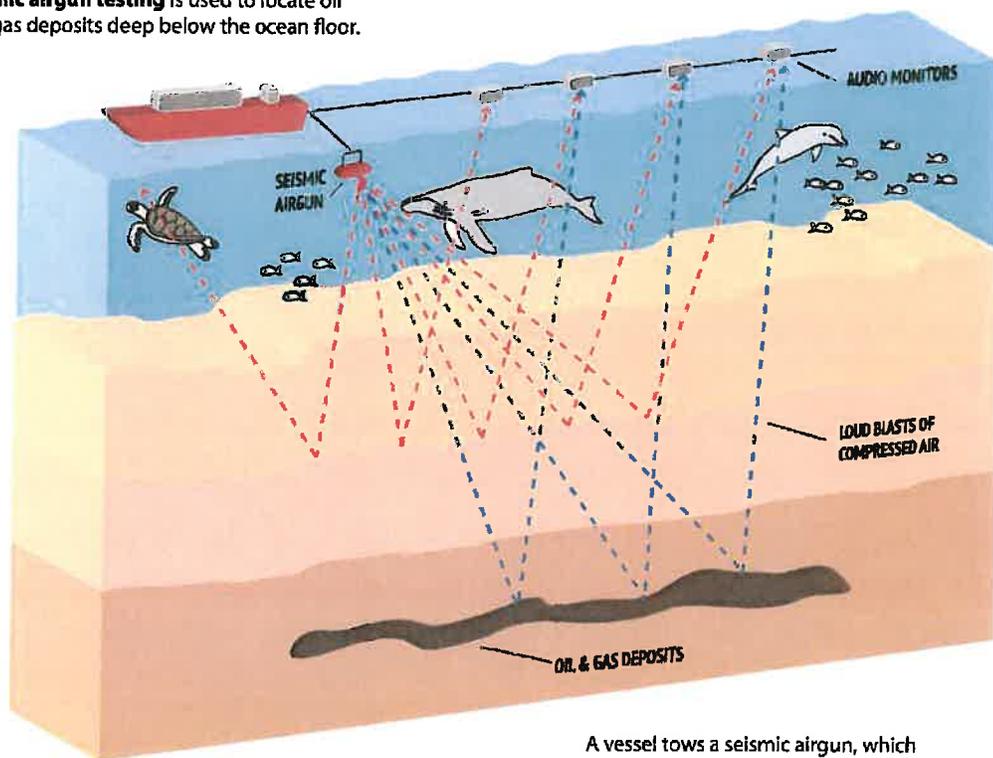
The Obama administration should shift its attention to developing clean renewable energy which, unlike offshore oil and gas, will never run out.

Renewable energy will help bolster energy independence while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which are causing climate change and ocean acidification, two of the most significant threats to ocean life.

Seismic Airgun Overview

Hundreds of thousands of marine mammals, as well as sea turtles, fish and other marine life, will be injured and possibly even killed unnecessarily if the Obama administration allows seismic airgun testing to go forward in the Atlantic Ocean. The U.S. Department of the Interior is considering allowing geophysical companies to search for oil and gas with seismic airguns off the East Coast from Delaware to Florida. This threat to whales, dolphins, sea turtles and fish is unnecessary in part because there can be no drilling in the Atlantic for at least the next five years based on current rules. Even without those rules for drilling in the Atlantic, seismic testing represents a continued investment in fossil fuels, a climate change driver, which we should be moving away from, rather than expanding. Developing the last drops of offshore oil is not a sufficient justification for the damaging effects of this proposed testing.

Seismic airgun testing is used to locate oil and gas deposits deep below the ocean floor.



© 2012 Sylvia Jiu, research by Oceana

A vessel tows a seismic airgun, which shoots extremely loud blasts of compressed air through the ocean and miles under the seafloor, **every ten seconds, 24 hours a day, for days to weeks on end.**

The seismic airguns would be towed behind ships and would shoot loud blasts that travel through the water and miles into the seabed. These blasts bounce back to the surface carrying with them information on oil and gas deposits. Airguns use compressed air to make intense pulses of sound, 100,000 times more intense than a jet engine, every ten seconds, 24 hours a day, for days to weeks on end. Testing in the Atlantic would last at least eight years, possibly more, creating massive and long-term acoustic pollution with severe impacts on marine life, including many endangered and threatened species. Harm to marine life can include temporary and permanent hearing loss, abandonment of habitat, disruption of mating and feeding, beach strandings and even death.

The Blast Zone

The Atlantic coast from Delaware to Florida – extending out to 350 miles¹⁷ offshore – could be opened up to seismic blasts. This is an area of ocean that is twice the size of California or 330,032 square miles.¹⁸ The airgun noise will injure or disturb commercially important fish species and marine mammals that migrate along the entire East Coast.

There would be an enormous amount of seismic activity in the mid- and south Atlantic with a vast environmental footprint. Two types of seismic surveys would be used. Two-dimensional surveys provide basic information about oil and gas deposits, and the newer three-dimensional surveys use arrays of dozens of airguns towed at various angles to create a higher resolution map. Both types of surveys are harmful for marine life.

More than 25,000 shots from airguns would be fired during a seismic survey lasting 10 days.²¹ The number of surveys could increase over time as geophysical companies will conduct more surveys if drilling becomes more likely. In that case, companies will send ships back again and again to certain areas of interest.

The blast zone includes abundant fishing grounds, marine protected areas, national marine sanctuaries, critical habitats for endangered species, underwater canyons, migration routes for whales and dolphins, sea turtle nesting sites and essential fish habitats. It is extremely difficult to avoid harming sensitive habitats and species since the sound from airgun surveys can travel for hundreds to thousands of miles.

Geophysical companies often test the same areas multiple times because they are hired by different oil and gas companies, and the data collected during each survey is considered proprietary information. This redundancy in surveying unnecessarily heightens the environmental impacts.

PROPOSED AREA

Seismic airgun testing is being considered from **Delaware to Florida**, but its impacts would be felt along the entire East Coast.



Seismic airgun blasts cause bubbles to rise to the surface.

© 2012 Sylvia Liu, research by Oceana

Marine Life Impacts

Airgun blasts are so loud and constant that they can cause a variety of impacts on marine mammals, sea turtles, fish and other marine life – including widespread displacement, disruption of vital behaviors such as foraging and breeding, and even injuries and death.²²



Approximately 39 humpback whales would be injured by seismic airgun testing in the Atlantic.

For marine mammals that are more sensitive to sound and depend greatly on their hearing, such as whales and dolphins, the airgun noise can be a severe threat. Airguns shoot low and high frequency sound, both of which can be harmful. The low frequency sound can travel thousands of miles away from the airgun source, interrupting whale calls and altering their behavior even at great distances. This is especially of concern for endangered baleen whales, such as the North Atlantic right whale, humpback whale, blue whale and fin whale. Fin and humpback whales in a 100,000 square mile area stopped singing in the North Atlantic because of such noise, and bowhead whales have abandoned their habitat because of it in Alaska.²³ Scaring whales away from important habitats can prevent them from feeding, migrating or reproducing for days to weeks at a time and these reoccurring disturbances could affect their survival and the health of their populations.

Some of the sound emitted by airguns is in the high frequency range; this type of sound is not useful for collecting data on oil and gas reserves and is considered waste sound, but it can still be very harmful for marine life. High frequency sound from seismic surveys can be detrimental to a number of toothed whales and dolphins, and can startle the animals causing them to stop important activities or flee from important habitats.²⁴ Marine mammals can also suffer from decompression sickness due to rapid ascents toward the surface. This is a deadly condition

often referred to as the bends in SCUBA divers.²⁵ The airgun noise can also disorient animals and scare them into shallower waters and bays where they can become stranded.

Sea turtles are impacted by airguns at every stage in life from hatchlings to adults, but they are thought to be most vulnerable while they are young.²⁶ One of the greatest concerns is disruption to nesting females as they head to beaches to lay their eggs. Sea turtle behavior is most altered by seismic sounds at low frequencies, like those emitted by airguns.²⁷ Airgun sounds can startle them and cause them to be unable to detect sounds that are necessary for important activities. All species of sea turtles are listed as endangered or threatened in U.S. waters and they could be seriously harmed by seismic surveys or future oil and gas drilling.

Airgun surveys can also kill fish eggs and larvae²⁸ and displace adult fish from their habitats.²⁹ Airgun noise can disrupt important behaviors in fish like foraging,³⁰ mask biologically significant sounds or prevent reproduction by causing hearing loss.³¹ Low-frequency sound has been shown to disrupt chorusing, or singing, in black drum fish, a behavior essential to breeding.³² These seismic surveys can also impact spawning and migration of fish species, which can limit their population size and their recoveries when overfished; however, more information is needed in this area.

In one case, catch rates of cod and haddock declined by 40 to 80 percent for at least five days over thousands of square miles after seismic testing occurred nearby.³³ Losses in catch rates after seismic surveys led fishermen in Norway to seek compensation in 2008.³⁴ Seismic testing is also being blamed for a dramatic reduction in the offshore tuna fishery in Namibia in 2012 and 2013, where it may have disrupted the migration of tuna, cutting the total catch in Namibian waters in half and causing their worst fishing season on record.³⁵

Shellfish, like crabs, oysters, scallops and lobsters, may also be impacted by airguns, but questions remain. In 2010, 80 percent (24,000 tons) of scallops were lost following intensive seismic surveys in Australia.³⁶ A three-year study into the role of seismic testing on this decline has already begun.

Serious concerns remain about how airguns affect fish and shellfish, including effects on migration, spawning and survival, which can translate into financial losses for the local fisheries that depend on them.



Sea turtles would be disrupted on their way to nesting beaches.

Unsolved Mysteries

Recent studies have revealed that seismic airguns degrade underwater acoustic environments and cause widespread disruptions to marine mammals and other marine life.⁹⁷ The blasts may cause population-level consequences for whales and dolphins by driving them away from preferred habitats and interrupting their most important behaviors.⁹⁸ For example, seismic surveys are implicated in the loss of marine mammal diversity off the coast of Brazil.⁹⁹

Another major concern is the chance of mass mortality events following seismic surveys for oil and gas. There have been many documented cases of marine mammals dying in large numbers after underwater sound events, but the link between seismic surveys for oil and gas with mass mortality events is often elusive. Although impacts are hard to identify and very few dead marine mammals are ever discovered – perhaps as few as 2 percent⁴⁰ – some mass mortality events following seismic testing have raised alarms about how deadly these tests may be.



Dead Melon-Headed Whales in Madagascar

In 2008 in Madagascar, dozens of melon-headed whales washed up dead following offshore seismic testing by Exxon Mobil.⁴¹ Melon-headed whales are a mid-water species that is believed to be sensitive to sound. The people of Madagascar had never before seen this species, and beaching events of melon-headed whales in this region are rare. An investigation was conducted into the link between the noise source and the stranding incident, and the results will be an important indicator of worst case scenarios following seismic testing.



Melon-headed whales and other marine mammals can be killed by sound.

Dead Dolphins and Porpoises in Peru

In 2012 in Peru, roughly 900 long-beaked common dolphins and black porpoises washed up dead along a desolate stretch of beach. Seismic surveying had been permitted offshore during the timeframe that the animals started washing up dead. Although the cause of death is unclear, necropsies of the dolphins showed some signs that seismic testing may be blamed. These signs included blood coming from their middle ears, fractures in their periotic ear bones, gas in their solid internal organs and severe acute pulmonary emphysema, which could have been caused by decompression sickness from a rapid ascent to the surface after being startled.⁴²

Similar mass mortality events could occur on the Atlantic coast following the proposed testing, should it go forward.

Marine Life Victims

The government's draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) included predictions of dire consequences for marine mammals in the Atlantic from seismic airgun surveys. The EIS, which likely underestimates the cumulative impacts since it is using outdated science, predicts 138,500 injuries to marine mammals and 13.5 million disturbances to vital behaviors like foraging, communicating and mating.⁴³

Although it is difficult to determine how many animals will be killed by seismic airguns, there are serious threats to the health and survival of a variety of species ranging from small fish eggs to large whales.

According to the EIS, the number of 'injuries' listed below for each species represents the number of times that those animals will experience "serious behavioral, physiological, and hearing effects."⁴⁴ Serious effects to hearing can kill whales and dolphins that depend on their ability to hear in order to feed, navigate, reproduce and care for their young. The 'disturbances' represent the number of times that important behaviors will be interrupted, including disruptions in "migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding or sheltering."⁴⁵

Baleen Whales



*Blue Whale

Injuries: **14**
Disturbances: **1,432**



*Humpback Whale

Injuries: **39**
Disturbances: **3,826**



*North Atlantic Right Whale

Injuries: **9**
Disturbances: **1,816**

The North Atlantic right whale is one of the rarest and most endangered species on the planet. It was almost hunted to extinction back in the eighteenth century, and there are only about 500 individuals left in the population. Harming even one of the remaining reproductive-age females can have serious consequences on its recovery. Its migratory route and only known calving ground off Georgia and northern Florida are threatened by proposed seismic testing.



Photo credits: (top to bottom)
Blue Whale: © Scott G. Freeman, NOAA Fisheries Service
Humpback Whale: © Scott G. Freeman, NOAA Fisheries Service
North Atlantic Right Whale: © Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Photo 15488

Toothed Whales and Dolphins



Short-Beaked Common Dolphin

Injuries: **22,809**

Disturbances: **2,235,585**



Short-Finned Pilot Whale

Injuries: **17,038**

Disturbances: **1,669,956**



Risso's Dolphin

Injuries: **11,358**

Disturbances: **1,113,281**



Killer Whale

Injuries: **12**

Disturbances: **1,255**



*Sperm Whale

Injuries: **975**

Disturbances: **95,940**



Striped Dolphin

Injuries: **13,657**

Disturbances: **1,338,571**



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin

Injuries: **20,641**

Disturbances: **2,023,058**



Bottlenose Dolphin

Injuries: **42,648**

Disturbances: **4,180,015**

*Species with a star are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Photo credits (Top to bottom, l to r): Short-Beaked Common Dolphin & Short-Finned Pilot Whale: © Southwest Fisheries Science Center, NOAA Fisheries Service; Risso's Dolphin: © OCEANA/Carlos Minguelli; Killer Whale: © Robert Pitman, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, NOAA Fisheries Service; Sperm Whale: © Peter G. Allinson, M.D. 2009/Marine Photobank; Striped Dolphin: © OCEANA/Jesús Frenedo; Atlantic Spotted Dolphin: © OCEANA/Eduardo Sorensen; Bottlenose Dolphin: © Claire Fackler, NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries

Sea Turtles



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Marine mammals are not the only animals that will be harmed by seismic airguns; sea turtles are also threatened by these sounds. All sea turtle species in the U.S. are threatened or endangered. The seismic blast zone in the Atlantic overlaps with populations of sea turtles, including green, leatherback, loggerhead, hawksbill and Kemp's Ridley, and contains thousands of nesting locations of particular importance to loggerheads. Since the East Coast has some of the most important nesting beaches for loggerheads,⁴⁶ minimizing disturbances to these nesting locations is paramount for the global conservation of this species. DOI's analysis of the impacts in the Atlantic observes that "Potential impacts could include auditory injuries or behavioral avoidance that interferes with nesting activities."⁴⁷ The recovery plan for the Northwest Atlantic population of loggerhead sea turtles notes that oil and gas activities, including seismic surveying, threaten these populations.⁴⁸

Ninety percent of all loggerhead nesting occurs in Florida, and specifically Brevard County, Florida represents vital loggerhead nesting habitat that must be protected from airguns and offshore oil and gas drilling. Sea turtles nest in many additional locations where seismic airguns could be permitted in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and other parts of Florida:



Kemp's Ridley hatchling

Sea Turtle Nests

Brevard County, Florida: 33,800 loggerhead.⁴⁹

Volusia County, Florida: 1,865 loggerhead.⁵⁰

Georgia: 1,761 loggerhead.⁵¹

South Carolina: 4,018 loggerhead, 3 green and 4 leatherback.⁵²

North Carolina: 948 loggerhead, 16 green and 1 Kemp's Ridley.⁵³

Loggerhead nesting is already declining in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and southeast Florida.⁵⁴ Nesting females and hatchlings could be disturbed or injured by the proposed seismic activities, so it is critical to loggerhead recovery to protect females heading to and from their nesting beaches and to protect hatchlings that enter the coastal zone. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is designating critical habitat for loggerheads, which would likely overlap with the proposed seismic tests.⁵⁵ Given the global significance of the region for loggerheads and other sea turtles, seismic airgun use should not be permitted.

State Level Impacts

Opening up new areas in the Atlantic to harmful seismic airguns and offshore drilling is unnecessary and puts coastal economies and jobs at risk. Commercial and recreational fishing in the mid- and southeast Atlantic, where seismic airgun testing is being proposed, generates \$11.8 billion annually and supports 222,000 jobs.⁶⁶ Several ports within the proposed area for seismic airgun testing have among the highest commercial fishing revenues in the United States. Seismic airgun testing could impact 108 fishing communities along the coast from Delaware to Florida.⁶⁷

Jobs and Revenue in Fisheries, Tourism and Recreation at Risk from Seismic Airguns and Offshore Drilling

State	Fisheries, Aquaculture & Seafood Markets GDP	Tourism & Recreation GDP	Tourism & Recreation Jobs	Recreational Fishing Jobs	Commercial Fishing Jobs
Delaware	\$14,222,630	\$492,990,932	13,408	1,270	407
Maryland	\$116,071,142	\$2,630,875,068	59,641	5,714	14,778
Virginia	\$573,719,022	\$1,962,257,873	85,514	5,167	19,064
North Carolina	\$156,743,452	\$982,666,376	30,380	17,221	8,479
South Carolina	\$10,604,779	\$2,401,134,933	55,485	5,035	1,169
Georgia	\$69,138,081	\$522,716,897	13,927	1,613	7,390
Florida	\$284,717,845	\$15,185,649,774	293,385	27,445	64,744

(Source: Compiled by Oceana from NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service data)

The proposed use of seismic airguns in the Atlantic Ocean threatens fisheries and local communities. Airgun noise can displace commercially valuable species of fish across vast areas and decrease catch rates for coastal fisheries. For example, in one study, catch rates for cod and haddock went down by 40 to 80 percent surrounding the use of a single airgun array for at least five days.⁶⁸ Fishermen in Norway recognized the impacts of the testing and requested compensation for losses to their catch rates following the process.⁶⁹

The use of seismic airguns is also the first major step toward dangerous offshore oil and gas drilling, which brings great risks in the form of accidents and oil spills. Offshore drilling, the same practice that brought us the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, was the largest and costliest environmental disaster in our country's history. The accident took 11 rig worker's lives, threatened public health and killed thousands of dolphins, birds, sea turtles, fish and other marine life. The spill has also had significant economic consequences, especially for fisheries.



Seismic airgun testing is the first step toward dangerous offshore drilling, the same practice that brought us the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

At the height of the spill, over one-third of federal waters in the Gulf were closed to commercial and recreational fishing, covering an area about the size of Minnesota.⁶⁰ The closure affected 22 percent of the annual U.S. commercial catch in the Gulf of Mexico and caused a loss of at least \$247 million in revenue.⁶¹ Fishing-dependent industries could lose \$8.7 billion and 22,000 jobs over the next seven years due to the Deepwater Horizon spill.⁶²

Seismic airguns and future offshore drilling could harm jobs and gross domestic product (GDP) in coastal tourism, recreation, and commercial and recreational fishing. Below is a state-by-state look at some of the jobs and revenues that could be put at risk in the proposed blast zone from Delaware to Florida.

Delaware

Each of Delaware's counties has considerable coastline. The GDP from Delaware's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$14 million.⁶³ GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$500 million.⁶⁴

Delaware jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

13,408 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁶⁵

1,270 jobs in recreational fishing⁶⁶

407 jobs in commercial fishing⁶⁷

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 15,085 jobs in Delaware that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

Delaware generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from blue crab, oysters, finfishes, eel and whelk.

Maryland

Maryland is famous for its blue crabs and is a state that depends on the ocean. Sixteen of its 23 counties border tidal water, for a total of 4,431 miles. The GDP from Maryland's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$116 million.⁶⁸ GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$2.6 billion.⁶⁹

Maryland jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

59,641 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁷⁰
5,714 jobs in recreational fishing⁷¹
14,778 jobs in commercial fishing⁷²

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 80,133 jobs in Maryland that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

Maryland generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from blue crab, striped bass, menhaden and oysters.

Virginia

From the Eastern Shore to Virginia Beach, to the ports of Hampton and Norfolk, Virginia has over 3,000 miles of coastline and is home to thousands who make their living on the shore. The GDP from Virginia's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$574 million.⁷³ GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$1.96 billion.⁷⁴

Virginia jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

85,514 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁷⁵
5,167 jobs in recreational fishing⁷⁶
19,064 jobs in commercial fishing⁷⁷

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 109,745 jobs in Virginia that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

Virginia generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from menhaden, scallops, blue crabs, croaker and flounder.

North Carolina

The Outer Banks, a long, narrow strip of barrier islands, cover nearly the entirety of North Carolina's coast. The state's abundant ocean resources are a major tourist attraction. The GDP from North Carolina's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at nearly \$157 million.⁷⁸ GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$983 million.⁷⁹

North Carolina jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

30,380 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁸⁰
17,221 jobs in recreational fishing
8,479 jobs in commercial fishing⁸¹

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 56,080 jobs in North Carolina that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

North Carolina generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from blue crab, shrimp, flounder, croaker and bluefish.

South Carolina

South Carolina's white sandy beaches and coastal towns are critical for the state's economy, recreation and culture. The GDP from South Carolina's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$10 billion.⁸² GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$2.4 billion.⁸³

South Carolina jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

55,485 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁸⁴
5,035 jobs in recreational fishing⁸⁵
1,169 jobs in commercial fishing⁸⁶

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 61,689 jobs in South Carolina that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

South Carolina generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from blue crab, shrimp, swordfish and snapper.

Georgia

Georgia has a beautiful coast, spanning over 100 miles, that supports a thriving commercial fishing industry, as well as whale and dolphin watching, resorts and recreational fishing, all large players in Georgia's economy. The GDP from Georgia's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$69 billion.⁸⁷ GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$523 million.⁸⁸

Georgia jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

13,927 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁸⁹
1,613 jobs in recreational fishing⁹⁰
7,390 jobs in commercial fishing⁹¹

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 22,930 jobs in Georgia that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

Georgia generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing, namely from blue crab, shrimp, various finfishes and clams.

Georgia also serves as critical habitat for North Atlantic right whales, one of the most endangered species on the planet. Approximately 500 North Atlantic right whales remain and they give birth in an area just offshore of southern Georgia.



Seismic airguns and oil spills threaten commercial and recreational fishing.

Florida

Florida has more coastline than any other state in the continental U.S., and its beaches and marine resources support prosperous coastal economies. The GDP from Florida's living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$284 million.⁹² GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$15 billion.⁹³

Florida jobs that could be impacted by airguns or drilling:

293,385 jobs in ocean-based tourism and recreation⁹⁴

27,445 jobs in recreational fishing⁹⁵

64,744 jobs in commercial fishing⁹⁶

From fishing, tourism and recreation, there are a total of 385,574 jobs in Florida that are directly dependent on the resources threatened by seismic airguns, and countless others that are indirectly dependent on those resources.

Florida generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing, namely from shrimp, mackerel, blue crab and swordfish.

Florida also serves as critical habitat for North Atlantic right whales, one of the most endangered species on the planet. Approximately 500 North Atlantic right whales remain and they give birth in an area just offshore of northeastern Florida.

Northeast Fisheries

In addition to Atlantic Coast fisheries, migratory fish species that pass through the blast zone could also be harmed by seismic airguns. Some highly migratory species that travel through the mid- and south Atlantic like wahoo, tunas, swordfish and billfishes⁹⁷ are important to the fisheries economies of the Northeast, including New England. Harm to migrating fish from seismic airguns could have effects on distant fisheries.

Recommendations

Seismic airguns pose unnecessary risks to marine mammals, sea turtles, fish and other ocean wildlife. The cumulative effects of seismic blasts repeated over large areas will disrupt critical activities and injure and kill many marine animals, including endangered species. Based on the threats of airguns to marine life and ocean resources Oceana makes the following recommendations:

Reject Airguns: The use of seismic airguns poses unavoidable and unacceptable impacts to marine life, including injuries or disturbances to protected and endangered species of marine mammals, sea turtles and fish. Due to the severity of acoustic harm caused by airguns, they should be phased out of use in U.S. waters, and all current proposals that incorporate the use of airguns should be denied.

Rejecting the use of seismic airguns and stopping the expansion of offshore drilling are a primary means of protecting marine life. But if seismic surveying does occur, the following steps should be taken to reduce impacts to marine life:

Make Seismic Data Publicly Available: DOI should make all information gathered during seismic surveying publicly available, and access to this information should not be restricted from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. This would reduce the redundancy in seismic surveys and allow the public to be more engaged in decision-making regarding offshore drilling.

Require Alternative Technologies for Seismic Surveys: DOI should require less harmful alternative technologies to airguns, such as marine vibroseis. Marine vibroseis, which creates sound through vibrations, can reduce the loudest peak noise that is generated during surveying and eliminate high frequency 'waste sound', which can help protect some marine mammals.⁹⁸ Although more field tests are needed, it would likely have some environmental benefits over airguns. Commercial testing of marine vibroseis is being conducted in 2013, and could completely phase out airguns in three to five years in U.S. waters with the appropriate policies in place. Marine vibroseis is not a panacea that will entirely eliminate harmful impacts from seismic surveying, but it should be considered as a viable alternative to airguns.

Create Large "No Activity Zones" for Sensitive Habitats and Species: DOI should never permit seismic surveys within or near the following areas: endangered species' critical habitat, areas with high densities of marine mammals, national marine sanctuaries, marine protected areas, coral communities and sensitive benthic habitats, important fishing grounds and fish spawning areas. Closing large areas permanently to seismic surveying and drilling is one of the most effective ways to protect vulnerable habitats and species. "No activity zones" must be large enough to create a buffer area between the air gun source and the protected area because airgun noise can disturb marine life from hundreds to thousands of miles away.

Support Renewable Energy like Offshore Wind: The Obama administration should shift its attention to developing clean renewable energy which, unlike offshore oil and gas, will never run out. Offshore wind could provide at least three times as many jobs as offshore oil and gas in the Atlantic, and could create enough electricity to power millions more homes with clean energy.⁹⁹ The permitting process for offshore wind in the region is much further along than oil and gas, and state and federal officials should continue to push for expansion of this growing clean energy source to help us transition from fossil fuels. Unlike offshore oil and gas drilling, offshore wind energy avoids the environmental threats of seismic airguns, oil spills and greenhouse gas emissions.

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