

Atlantic Geological and Geophysical and Surveys *Record of Decision on the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement*



Time-area closures are required to protect the North Atlantic right whale. Photo: NOAA

BOEM, in cooperation with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), and pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), released a final [Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement](#) (PEIS) in February 2014 that evaluated potential environmental effects of proposed geological and geophysical (G&G) survey activities on the Mid- and South Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf (OCS). The PEIS covers an area which extends from the Delaware Bay to just south of Cape Canaveral and from the inner edge of Federal waters along that coastline to 403 miles offshore.

The analysis responds to a 2010 Congressional request to provide a comprehensive review of potential environmental impacts of G&G activities off the Atlantic coast. The NEPA process is an open and public process. During the development of the PEIS, 15 public meetings and two formal public comment periods for the EIS were held, resulting in the receipt of over 120,000 public comments. BOEM considered the public input as well as technical information and selected Alternative B of the PEIS. Alternative B authorizes review of permit applications for G&G activities in all three program areas (oil and gas, renewable energy and marine minerals) and provides the highest practicable level of mitigation measures proposed for airgun acoustic sources and the most reasonable level of mitigation measures for non-airgun sources. A formal [Record of Decision](#) (ROD) was issued by BOEM in July 2014.

The mitigation measures will be incorporated in any surveys authorized. Completion of the PEIS and the release of the ROD do not themselves authorize any specific activities or indicate any decision about future leasing.

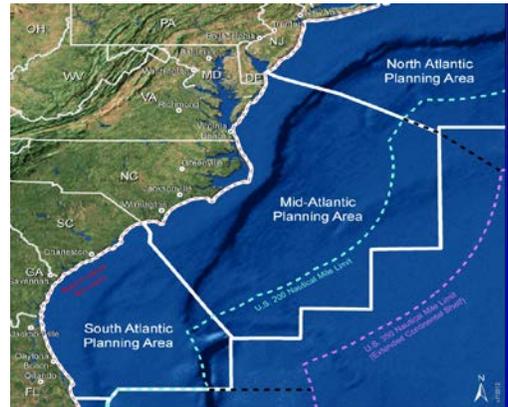
Specific mitigation measures in Alternative B include survey protocols such as visual monitoring by trained protected species observers; exclusion zones around vessels; shut-down and ramp-up procedures; passive acoustic monitoring; and time-area closures to protect the North Atlantic right whale and sea turtles.

Background

Seismic surveys use sound waves which are sent through the ocean floor to map the subsurface. These acoustic surveys are conducted to: (1) obtain data for hydrocarbon exploration and production; (2) aid in siting renewable energy structures by characterizing the ocean floor; (3) locate potential sand and gravel resources; (4) identify possible seafloor or shallow depth geologic hazards; and (5) locate potential archaeological resources and potential hard bottom habitats that should be avoided.

From 1966-1988, 2-dimensional (2D) seismic data were acquired in all areas of the Atlantic OCS. This data, acquired over 30 years ago, has been eclipsed by new acquisition techniques using more advanced instrumentation, computer capacity, and technology. However seismic surveys have not been conducted since the 1980s because of a Federal moratorium on oil and gas activities off the Atlantic coast, which expired in 2008, and because BOEM decided not to begin reviewing permit applications until the PEIS was completed and a decision made on its alternatives.

Newer surveys are needed to make decisions concerning potential oil and gas leases, renewable energy project construction, and the composition and volume of sand and gravel resources for coastal restoration projects. This information would also be used to ensure the proper use and conservation of OCS energy resources and the receipt of fair market value for any leasing of public lands. Modern 2D and 3D acquisition techniques can provide data sets that significantly enhance subsurface imaging, leading to improved oil and gas resource assessments and more informed administration of regulatory responsibilities.



Since 1998, BOEM has partnered with academia and other experts to invest more than \$50 million on protected species and noise-related research. The bureau has provided critical studies on marine mammals, such as evaluation of seismic survey impacts on endangered sperm whales, and BOEM has conducted numerous expert stakeholder workshops to discuss and identify further information needs on acoustic impacts in the ocean.

G&G surveys covered by this decision are not used exclusively for oil and gas exploration. These surveys are also helpful in identifying sand used for restoration of our Nation’s beaches and barrier islands following severe weather events and for protecting coasts and wetlands from erosion. Seismic and geologic coring surveys also provide information that is vital to the siting and development of offshore renewable energy facilities. G&G surveys also help to advance fundamental scientific knowledge and are currently conducted in the Gulf of Mexico and in countries around the world.

Making decisions based on sound science, public input, and the best information available is a critical to environmentally responsible development of the nation’s offshore energy resources. BOEM, by using an adaptive management approach, will consider new scientific information as it becomes available during survey-specific environmental reviews.

Process going forward

The ROD documents the selected alternative and describes mitigation measures that will be incorporated in site-specific G&G permits for any future G&G activities in the Atlantic. BOEM will conduct site-specific environmental reviews for any permit applications. These reviews will include coordination and consultation with federal, state and tribal authorities under a suite of additional statutory requirements. BOEM will also require that operators receive any required authorization from NOAA Fisheries before any final authorization from BOEM is provided. NOAA will not authorize use of G&G surveys unless there is negligible impact and no adverse effects on recruitment or survival of marine mammal species or stocks.

The decision to authorize G& G activities for all three program areas (oil and gas, renewable energy and marine minerals) does not authorize leasing for oil and gas exploration and development in the Atlantic. Those decisions will be addressed through the development of the next Five Year Program for Oil and Gas Leasing. BOEM is at the beginning of the process to develop that program as required by the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act (OCSLA). The planning process will take two-and-a-half to three years to complete and will offer many opportunities for the public to provide input.

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