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CONTACT: Lee Scurry

(202) 208-3983

MMS SOLICITS COMMENTS FOR NEW 5-YEAR OCS LEASING PROGRAM  
(#40089)

The U.S. Interior Department's Minerals Management Service (MMS) is soliciting comments for developing the new 5-Year Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 1997-2002 and the accompanying Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), officials announced today.

The Interior Department is required by the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Lands Act to prepare and maintain OCS natural gas and oil leasing programs that cover 5-year periods. The current program ends in July 1997.

"One of our priorities at MMS is to work closely with our customers and involve them in decisionmaking -- especially in designing a new 5-Year Program," said MMS Acting Director Cynthia Quarterman. "We've made a concerted effort to involve our customers in the decisionmaking process at every step. An example is the OCS Policy Committee's recommendation that we establish a Regional Shareholders' Task Force to focus on the planning process in Alaska. We've eagerly accepted that suggestion and look forward to working with the task force.

"The November 16 Federal Register notice, which is an open request for input from all interested parties, marks the initial stage of a planning process which will take more than two years," she said. "We make no predetermination of what to include or exclude in the program before comments are solicited and reviewed," Quarterman said.

"The law requires us to solicit comments pertaining to all of the planning areas of the OCS, even those that are now excluded from leasing consideration because of executive direction, congressional restrictions or previous 5-year program decisions," Quarterman said. "The MMS will not ignore the measures that are in place, but asks for views concerning them."

MMS is requesting comments on the size, timing, and location of leasing activity. Anyone interested may nominate areas for inclusion or deletion. Governors are asked to identify and comment on any coastal zone management issues that could arise. The industry is asked to identify and rank their interest in leasing

offshore areas during the 1997-2002 period.

"Additionally," Quarterman said, "we're interested in recommendations on the following topics:

- Policies and procedures for assuring the receipt of fair market value for OCS lease rights;
- The decision process leading to individual lease sales;
- Initiatives for improved involvement and participation of constituents in development and implementation of the 5-Year Program;
- Environmental issues to be addressed in the EIS;
- Alternative dispute resolution techniques that could be applied both in the relatively short term embodied by the next program, and over the longer term; and
- Regionally-tailored approaches to the OCS program, e.g., what policies and procedures should be applied to specific regions of the OCS."

MMS will review all comments received as part of the process of developing the draft plan, scheduled to be issued in the Summer of 1995. The draft will describe proposed leasing policies and include a possible schedule of proposed sales. If the draft proposed program suggests no leasing for particular planning areas, further analysis and consideration of those areas will not be necessary. Comments will be solicited again on the draft plan, and a third time on the proposed final program before further approval is sought.

"We will develop the new program based on sound science, open and informative communication, and meaningful consultation," Quarterman said. "I'm confident that such an approach will produce a program that ensures environmental safeguards, is responsive to the nation's energy needs, and addresses customer and stakeholder concerns."

Comments, due January 9, 1995, should be mailed to: 5-Year Program Project Director, Minerals Management Service, MS-4400, Room 1324, 381 Elden Street, Herndon, VA 22070. Also, MMS will accept hand deliveries at 1849 C Street, NW, Room 4230, Washington, DC. For more information contact Carol Hartgen, 5-Year Program Project Director, at (703) 787-1216.

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