

Submerged Lands Act (SLA) of 1953

Submerged Lands Act (SLA) of 1953, 43 U.S.C. § 1301 et seq., is a U.S. federal law that recognized the title of the states to submerged navigable lands within their boundaries at the time they entered the Union. They include navigable waterways, such as rivers, as well as marine waters within the state's boundaries, generally three geographical miles (almost exactly 3 nautical miles or 5.6 kilometers) from the coastline.

In passing the Submerged Lands Act, Congress sought to return the title to submerged lands to the states and promote the exploration and development of petroleum deposits in coastal waters.

The Submerged Lands Act was enacted in response to litigation that effectively transferred ownership of the first 3 miles of a state's coastal submerged lands to the federal government. In the case *United States v. California* (1947), the United States successfully argued that the three nautical miles seaward of California belonged to the federal government, primarily finding that the federal government's responsibility for the defense of the marginal seas and the conduction of foreign relations outweighed the interests of the individual states.

In response, Congress adopted the SLA in 1953, granting title to the natural resources located within three miles of their coastline (three marine leagues for Texas and the Gulf coast of Florida). For purposes of the SLA, the term "natural resources" includes oil, gas, and all other minerals.

Title II addresses the rights and claims by the States to the lands and resources beneath navigable waters within their historic boundaries and provides for their development by the States.

Title III preserves the control of the seabed and resources therein of the Outer Continental Shelf beyond State boundaries and to the federal government and authorizes leasing by the Secretary of the Interior in accordance with certain specified terms and conditions.

The SLA was upheld in 1954 by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Alabama v. Texas*) emphasizing that Congress could relinquish to the states the federal government's property rights over the submerged lands without interfering with U.S. national sovereign interests.