

Frequently Asked Questions

2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program

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What is the Outer Continental Shelf?

The Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) consists of all submerged lands (the seafloor) lying seaward of State waters. BOEM manages 1.7 billion acres of submerged lands on the OCS, which is more than 2/3 of the total land area of the United States! BOEM divides the OCS into 26 planning areas. Planning areas are an administrative division used as the initial basis for considering what areas to lease.

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What is the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act?

The Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, or the OCS Lands Act, established the OCS as "a vital national resource reserve held by the Federal Government for the public, which should be made available for expeditious and orderly development, subject to environmental safeguards, in a manner which is consistent with the maintenance of competition and other national needs" and gave the Secretary of the Interior the authority to grant leases for the exploration, development, and production of oil and gas on the OCS.

The OCS Lands Act requires the Secretary of the Interior to prepare a five-year schedule of proposed oil and gas lease sales. The Secretary of the Interior and BOEM are embarking on the development of the 2019-2024 National OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program (National OCS Program), which includes several opportunities for public involvement and comment.

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What are the specific factors that the Secretary of the Interior must consider when developing a National OCS Program?

Per the OCS Lands Act, the Secretary must consider eight factors when determining the size, timing, and location of potential oil and gas lease sales:

- Geographical, Geological, and Ecological Characteristics
- Equitable Sharing of Developmental Benefits and Environmental Risks
- Location with Respect to Regional and National Energy Markets and Needs
- Other Uses of the Sea and Seabed
- Laws, Goals, and Policies of Affected States Identified by Governors
- Interest of Potential Oil and Gas Producers
- Environmental Sensitivity and Marine Productivity
- Environmental and Predictive Information

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What is the Draft Proposed Program?

The Draft Proposed Program (DPP) is the first stage of a three-stage process to develop the National OCS Program. The National OCS Program development process starts with the broadest consideration of areas potentially available for leasing (i.e., all 26 OCS planning areas) and is narrowed through a winnowing process. Following the publication of the DPP, BOEM will publish a Proposed Program followed by the Proposed Final Program. The Secretary considers and makes a decision on all three program documents.

Inclusion of an area at the DPP phase is not a final indication it will be included in the National OCS Program or offered in a lease sale; many decisions will be made that may potentially reduce or remove areas or sales. The Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) analyzes the potential environmental impacts from activities that could occur based on the schedule of lease sales in the DPP.

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What is a lease sale?

A lease sale is the process by which BOEM provides the right to apply for authorization to explore and develop the mineral resources within the leased area. Typically, a lease sale consists of many OCS blocks. Each block covers an area that is no more than 5,760 acres (a three mile by three mile area).

Before authorizing any activities, BOEM conducts a review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and numerous other environmental laws to ensure that the activities will be conducted in a safe and environmentally sound manner, and that the interests of key stakeholders are considered.

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What is NEPA?

NEPA was passed in 1970 and requires Federal agencies to consider potential environmental impacts of and alternatives to any action they propose. The NEPA process includes opportunities for public review and comment on these evaluations.

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How does NEPA integrate with the OCS Lands Act process?

The NEPA process informs decision-making alongside the OCS Lands Act process. For the National OCS Program, BOEM is developing a Programmatic EIS. A Programmatic EIS is a document that contains the analyses regarding the potential environmental impacts of an action within a broad geographic scope, such as oil and gas leasing in OCS waters.

BOEM uses the Programmatic EIS to disclose the environmental impacts of the National OCS Program, ways to effectively avoid or mitigate those impacts, and other viable alternatives and options for the National OCS Program. The Secretary considers the Final Programmatic EIS together with the National OCS Program when making a final decision regarding the schedule of lease sales. In addition, BOEM prepares subsequent NEPA reviews before an area is leased, including site-specific analyses.

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What is scoping?

The first step in the NEPA process is determining potential issues, impacts, and alternatives through a process called scoping. NEPA requires scoping to be an early and open process for determining the potentially significant issues to be addressed by the Programmatic EIS. BOEM is asking for input on what issues should be covered in this Programmatic EIS. The most important things to capture are what people, places, habitats, or species are the most likely to be affected, or other impacts on the environment.