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**Central Gulf of Mexico Lease Sale 194 Receives 651 Bids on 428 Tracts
Eastern Gulf of Mexico Lease Sale 197 Receives 12 Bids on 12 Tracts**

NEW ORLEANS - The U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service Gulf of Mexico Outer Continental Shelf Region announced at 10 a.m. today that it has received 651 bids from 72 companies on 428 tracts offered in the Central Gulf of Mexico Lease Sale 194 and 12 bids from 6 companies on 12 tracts offered in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico Lease Sale 197. Lease Sales 194 and 197 will take place tomorrow, March 16, 2005 at 9 a.m. at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, (at the Louisiana Superdome), 500 Poydras Plaza, (Cabildo Ballrooms A, B, and C) in downtown New Orleans, Louisiana. Lynn Scarlett, Assistant Secretary, Policy, Management and Budget, Department of the Interior, will kick-off the sale.

Chris Oynes, MMS Regional Director will be available after the sale to answer any media inquiries.

This sale will be WebCast through the Offshore Oil Scouts Association at www.oosa.com. Real Player will need to be installed in order to run the WebCast. Webcasts of the upcoming MMS lease sale does not imply any endorsement by MMS.

MMS, part of the U.S. Department of the Interior, oversees 1.76 billion acres of the Outer Continental Shelf, managing offshore energy and minerals while protecting the human, marine, and coastal environments through advanced science and technology research. The OCS provides 30 percent of oil and 23 percent of natural gas produced domestically, and sand used for coastal restoration. MMS collects, accounts for, and disburses mineral revenues from Federal and American Indian lands, with fiscal year 2004 disbursements of around \$8 billion and more than \$143 billion since 1982. The Land and Water Conservation Fund, which pays for cooperative conservation, grants to states, and Federal land acquisition, gets nearly \$1 billion a year.