Impacts of Offshore Natural Gas Drilling on Marine Wildlife


Bearded seal

National Marine Mammal Laboratory


Endangered sea otter


Laysan albatross

The marine wildlife that call America's oceans home, including whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, sea otters, sea turtles, fish, sharks, and birds**, will be put at great risk if Congress lifts the ban on offshore natural gas drilling.**


Endangered Humpback whales


Endangered Hawksbill sea turtles

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Offshore Natural Gas Drilling: Effects on Wildlife*

Marine Mammals

• Deep-divers and surface-feeders, like the endangered sperm whale and endangered sea otter, spend large amounts of time at the surface of the ocean, increasing the **risk of collision** with vessels associated with offshore drilling activities.

• Natural gas condensates and drilling wastes are very toxic and can affect survival or reproductive success through **direct exposure** and by affecting distribution, abundance, or availability of their prey.

Sea Turtles

•Government studies suggested that vessel traffic around platforms may **increase collisions** with sea turtles. Sea turtles are difficult to sight from moving vessels and often rest on or just below the surface of the ocean.

•All 6 species are either endangered or threatened, making any adverse effects very significant to the overall populations. Species include Loggerhead, Leatherback, Green, Kemp's ridley, Olive ridley, and Hawksbill.

Birds

• Proposed lease areas are in the heart of some of the **most important migration corridors** in the world, used by hundreds of species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, warblers, and terns.

• Government studies demonstrate that drilling development in migration corridors may result in a large increase in **collision mortality** in migrant species.

• Studies also show that birds are attracted to the lighted platforms during nocturnal migration; they circle out of confusion and die of exhaustion.

• Truly marine species that feed in the open ocean, like albatrosses, pelicans, frigatebirds, cormorants, storm-petrels, puffins, and skimmers, are at a particularly high risk of exposure to toxic natural gas drilling wastes.

Fisheries

• An EPA study showed that **acute histologic lesions** were observed in fish collected near natural gas drilling platforms.

• Offshore natural gas platforms affect **commercial fishing** by **contaminating fish with mercury**, (including grouper, snapper, redfish, trout, tuna, swordfish, tilefish, cobia, amberjack, and mackerel), interfering with migratory routes, spawning, and feeding areas for target species, generating pollution that **destroys crucial nursery habitat** for larval and juvenile stages, and by reducing catches.

• Government studies demonstrated that tissue samples of fish and shellfish, as well as sediment samples, taken around natural gas drilling rigs had **mercury levels thousands of times higher** than those taken elsewhere.

• Fish and shellfish are attracted to and spend much of their lives feeding around natural gas drilling platforms, where MMS sediment samples indicate mercury levels are the highest.

• **Mercury contamination around natural gas rigs** is severe enough that some have been placed on EPA's National Priorities List of the most polluted spots in the nation.

* Information provided was gathered from the following publications of the Minerals Management Service, Department of Interior:

Deepwater Gulf of Mexico Environmental and Socioeconomic Data Search and Literature Synthesis. Volume I: Narrative Report. 2000. Minerals Management Service.

Interactions Between Migrating Birds and Offshore Oil and Gas Platforms in the Northern Gulf of Mexico. Final Report. 2005. Minerals Management Service.

Gulf of Mexico Offshore Monitoring Experiment, Phase I: Sublethal Response to Contaminant Exposure: Final Report. 1995. Minerals Management Service.