Introduction

At the joint meeting of the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils in October, it was requested staff develop a resolution for Council consideration to oppose offshore exploration, drilling, and seismic testing in the Atlantic Ocean. The purpose of this item is to provide Council with information on current activities and proposals with respect to exploration and the potential for leasing of areas of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS).

Background and Analysis

A key aspect of implementing President Donald J. Trump’s America-First Offshore Energy Strategy is the initiation of a new National OCS Program development process, outlined in Executive Order (E.O.) 13795 of April 28, 2017; and Secretary Order 3350 of May 1, 2017, issued by Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) Ryan K. Zinke. Section 2 of E.O. 13795 states that it is United States policy to encourage energy exploration and production to maintain the nation’s global energy leadership and “foster energy security and resilience for the benefit of the American people, while ensuring that any such activity is safe and environmentally responsible.” Under E.O. 13795, there is the potential for millions of coastal acres to be used for oil and gas leasing. Secretary Order 3350 calls for enhancing opportunities for energy exploration, leasing, and development of the OCS, establishing regulatory certainty for OCS activities, and enhancing conservation stewardship, thereby providing jobs, energy security, and revenue for the American people.

In response to these orders, this past July the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) requested public information and comment on the preparation of a new 5-year National OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2019-2024. The three planning areas located offshore of Florida (Attachment A) are the eastern Gulf of Mexico (most under congressional moratoria until June 30, 2022); the Straits of Florida (not included in the current program); and a portion of the South Atlantic. The proposed program is intended to replace the 2017-2022 program, which was approved on January 17, 2017, concerning all planning areas of the OCS, including those
currently under congressional moratoria or withdrawn from leasing. Comments received by Council with respect to this process are included in this report (Attachment B).

Data suggests that portions of the Atlantic OCS may contain significant oil and gas resource potential; however, current geological and geophysical (G&G) information is based on data collected in the 1970s and early 1980s. Tremendous advances in instrumentation and technology for the acquisition and analysis of G&G data have been made in the intervening decades. One of the methods used for searching for oil and gas deposits under the ocean’s surface is seismic airgun blasting. This process involves blasting compressed air through water into the seabed and the resulting sound waves are recorded, and the potential for the area containing oil and gas is analyzed. The blasts, which can be heard up to 2,500 miles away, are repeated every 10 minutes, 24 hours a day, for weeks on end.

In recognition of these advances in G&G data acquisition technology and the need to better understand the scope of existing resources, on July 23, 2014 BOEM published a Record of Decision for the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Atlantic G&G activities which established a path forward for G&G activities off the Mid- and South Atlantic coast. BOEM is currently evaluating several G&G permit applications. With the initiation of a new program development process and the renewed potential for a lease sale in the Atlantic region, BOEM may receive new G&G permit applications in the near future.

Oceana, established in 2001, is an international organization whose mission is to protect and restore the world’s oceans. Oceana has indicated seismic airgun use injures and kills marine life, especially dolphins and whales, and threatens the economic well-being and quality of life for coastal communities. Oceana cites an abundance of grassroots opposition to exploration and drilling in the Atlantic Ocean and the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The organization reports that there are 141 east coast municipalities and over 1,200 local, state and federal elected officials which have publicly opposed drilling and/or seismic airgun blasting; fishing, tourism, and restaurant industry representatives, chambers of commerce, and an alliance of over 41,000 businesses and 500,000 fishing families from Florida to Maine that oppose oil exploration and/or development in the Atlantic; and several agencies such as NASA, the Department of Defense, and the Florida Defense Support Task Force are concerned that expanded offshore oil and gas development will affect their ability to do their jobs (Source: http://usa.oceana.org/climate-and-energy/grassroots-opposition-offshore-drilling-and-exploration-atlantic-ocean-and).

Other related federal action includes passing of the Strengthening the Economy with Critical Untapped Resources to Expand American Energy Act (SECURE American Energy Act) on November 8th by the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee. This act is an effort to advance energy exploration and oil drilling by providing states with a share of federal revenues in order to encourage approval and expansion of off-shore drilling, and delegates certain permitting responsibilities to state regulatory agencies. Proponents of the bill state the act will create jobs, stimulate energy production, and advance our nation’s energy dominance. Opponents say the act will reduce protections for marine animals, be detrimental to our national parks and natural resources, and place energy development over species conservation and human health and quality of life.
Conclusion

If testing should lead to OCS oil and gas leasing and drilling in the South Atlantic, Eastern Gulf of Mexico, and the Florida Straits planning areas such actions would be inconsistent with Strategic Regional Policy Plan Strategy 9.1.1: Reduce the Region’s reliance on fossil fuels. Among other concerns, Council is concerned with the effects of offshore oil and gas exploration on the State’s ocean and estuarine water quality. Specifically, Florida’s major economic engine, the tourism industry, relies on clean waters and healthy beaches. The potential risk of oil spills, fires, and air pollution off Florida’s coasts creates uncertainty in the future viability of this industry. Previous accidents in the Gulf of Mexico have demonstrated the devastating effect on tourism from these events. The proposed project is also in conflict with Strategy 3.3.1: Maintain and improve existing features which are attributes to the attraction of tourists. Furthermore, the proposed project is in conflict with Regional Goal 6.4: Protection of beachfront and environmentally sensitive coastal and marine resources; and Regional Goal 6.5: Protection of estuarine resources.

As an alternative to new offshore drilling projects, offshore wind energy and ocean current energy projects are needed to increase the proportion of electricity produced from renewable resources. The use of these renewable resources is preferred over the traditional burning of fossil fuels because they do not result in greenhouse gas emissions nor do they create the risk of accidents such as oil spills. The prospect of sea level rise is of particular concern to the State of Florida because of its expansive coastline; low elevations and flat topography; shallow coastal wellfields; economic dependence of the tourism industry on beaches and coastal resources; and significant public and private investment in coastal areas. A continued effort to develop and commercially produce renewable energy in the State is a more sustainable strategy for the future welfare of the region.

Resolution 17-05 is provided for Council’s consideration for opposing offshore exploration, drilling, and seismic testing in the Atlantic Ocean.

Recommendation:

Council should adopt Resolution 17-05 and authorize its transmittal to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, the U.S. Congressional Delegation from Florida, the Florida Legislature, and the Governor.

Attachments
July 26, 2017

Ms. Kelly Hammerle
National Program Manager, BOEM
45600 Woodland Road
Mailstop VAM-LD
Sterling, VA 20166

Re: Request for Information and Comments on the Preparation of the 2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program MAA 104000

Dear Ms. Hammerle:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the preparation of the 2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program. On behalf of the Martin County Board of County Commissioners, I am writing in strong opposition to any expansion of offshore drilling. Martin County is located on the Treasure Coast of Southeast Florida, immediately north of Palm Beach County, and has a population of just over 153,000. I cannot overstate our concern with the impacts of oil and gas drilling on the ecosystem, tourism industry and economy of our community.

Martin County’s economy depends on the health of our waterways and our natural ecosystem. Like many coastal communities, our way of life is tied directly to our waterways. The St. Lucie Federal Navigation Inlet provides a conduit between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian River Lagoon, which is the most biodiverse estuary in North America, as well as a lagoon of national significance. This ecosystem provides habitat for over 4,300 species of plants and animals, including more than 30 threatened or endangered species such as manatee, wood stork, sand hill crane, and peregrine falcon.

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The offshore waters also contain coral reefs, which are at the northern end of the Florida Reef tract. These coral reefs provide vital ecosystem services to a valuable and thriving fishery. The fishery serves as the economic basis for our commercial, sport and recreational fishing industry.

We are extremely concerned about the potential of drilling off the shores of Martin County and across the state of Florida. Despite taking place hundreds of miles away, the Deepwater Horizon disaster impacted Martin County’s tourism industry. We cannot support any actions that may bring that danger closer to our shores. The tourism industry is key to Florida. The state welcomed over 112 million visitors in 2016, bringing $109 billion into the Florida economy.

Our waterways are environmentally sensitive and already faced with significant threats, including impaired water quality from excessive nutrients, extreme freshwater inflows, and invasive species. Surface waters of the northeast Everglades naturally flowed south to the Everglades, west to Lake Okeechobee and east to the Indian River Lagoon. Projects constructed in the 1950’s diverted surface water into canals and into the St. Lucie Estuary and the Indian River Lagoon. As a result, billions of gallons of freshwater are wasted daily to the Atlantic Ocean. During large surface water discharge events, the water quality of the lagoon and surrounding estuary are severely impacted, harming aquatic plants and animals, and requiring restriction for human contact. Martin County is vigilant in our desire to improve our waterways. We have strong environmental regulations and have partnered with the federal and state government as a leader in restoration and conservation. Martin County has acquired over 45,000 acres for various Comprehensive Everglades Restoration (CERP) projects. Since 2000, Martin County has invested over $50 million in stormwater projects and has restored 28 acres of oyster habitat in the St. Lucie Estuary. Martin County is invested in continued improvements and cannot support any activities that could degrade our natural environment or undermine the federal government’s investment in improving our waterways.
The Martin County Board of County Commissioner is opposed to all oil and gas exploration off the Atlantic Coast of Florida. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on this important issue.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Doug Smith
Chairman
Martin County Board of County Commissioners

cc: Governor Rick Scott
RESOLUTION #17-05

A RESOLUTION OF THE TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL REPRESENTING THE 55 LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF INDIAN RIVER, MARTIN, PALM BEACH AND ST. LUCIE COUNTIES, FLORIDA, OPPOSING OUTER CONTINENTAL SHELF OIL EXPLORATION AND LEASING, SEISMIC AIRGUN TESTING, AND OFFSHORE DRILLING IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

WHEREAS, Indian River, Martin, Palm Beach, and St. Lucie counties form the four-county region represented by the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC); and

WHEREAS, TCRPC is responsible for the implementation of the Strategic Regional Policy Plan (SRPP) to help guide decisions in the Region; and

WHEREAS, the region is part of the Indian River Lagoon system which is a diverse estuary and home to more than 3,000 species of plants and animals; and

WHEREAS, the TCRPC region is located on the east coast of Florida along the Atlantic Ocean and endeavors to be a good steward of the coastal environment, natural resources, and its animals; and

WHEREAS, residents have an expectation of a quality of life tied to that environment and have demonstrated their concern for our ocean environment; and

WHEREAS, seismic airguns fire intense blasts of compressed air every 1-12 seconds twenty-four hours a day for days to weeks on end when being used for testing; and

WHEREAS, seismic airgun testing could result in serious negative impacts to marine resources that form the foundation of economic vitality of communities along the Atlantic coast and could injure or possibly kill thousands of marine mammals and fish, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale; and

WHEREAS, more passive, lower-impact alternative technologies for exploration may be available in the near future; and

WHEREAS, the State of Florida has a long history of hurricanes and other severe Atlantic storms which significantly increases the risk and likelihood of offshore drilling platform failures and/or oil spills; and

WHEREAS, any such offshore failure or oil spill would be disastrous to our coastal environment beaches, marine resources and local economy; and

WHEREAS, our regional tourism and fishing industries depend on a healthy and vibrant coastal environment that will provide a major economic driver that will benefit the current and future residents, property owners, and visitors to Florida; and
WHEREAS, the full impacts of seismic testing and offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean are not yet fully understood by scientists, the oil and gas industry, the Bureau of Ocean Management, or the Federal government; and

WHEREAS, exploration and development of oil and gas resources off the coast of Florida will not effectively address long-term energy needs for our country.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council:

Section 1. Opposes outer continental shelf oil exploration and leasing;

Section 2. Opposes the use of seismic airgun testing in the Atlantic Ocean;

Section 3. Opposes offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean; and

Section 4. Encourages alternatives to new offshore drilling projects, such as offshore wind energy and ocean current energy projects to increase the proportion of electricity produced from renewable resources.

DULY ADOPTED by the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council this 8th day of December 2017.

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Doug Smith       Michael J. Busha
Chairman       Executive Director