
The Washington Post

MAY 23, 2010

Rahall demands NOAA hand over environmental documents

By Juliet Eilperin

House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick J. Rahall (D-WVa.) has demanded the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration turn over any documents that would help explain how the agency monitored how offshore oil and gas drilling might impact marine life in the Gulf of Mexico.

In a May 19 letter to NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco, Rahall asks her to provide his panel with information the agency has collected over the past five years in two key categories (direct quotes in italics):

- Unredacted copies of any and all documents related to potential impacts to threatened and endangered species, marine mammals, Essential Fish Habitat, critical habitat and fisheries as a result of energy development

activities in the Gulf of Mexico, where such activities include but are not limited to leasing plans, lease sales, geological or geophysical exploration, exploration or development plans, and drilling permits; and

- Unredacted copies of all formal or informal consultations and official or unofficial comments under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act related to energy development activities in the Gulf of Mexico, where such activities include but are not limited to leasing plans, lease sales, geological or geophysical exploration, exploration or development plans, and drilling permits.

The documents could shed light on why the Minerals Management Service has approved energy exploration in the Gulf of Mexico in the past without obtaining the required NOAA permits

under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. A number of groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, are now suing the Obama administration on the issue.

Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, lauded Rahall's move, saying the documentation--which is due before the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife holds a hearing on the issue on June 15--will demonstrate a lack of government oversight.

"NOAA has been warning MMS since at least 2002 that it is violating the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act," he wrote in an e-mail. "You have to wonder why NOAA hasn't just shut MMS down by now. That may be what it takes to get the oil agency's attention."