



OFFSHORE DRILLING: Enviros threaten suit over Gulf of Mexico projects

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Four environmental groups today threatened to sue the Interior Department for allegedly ignoring marine-mammal protection laws in allowing Gulf of Mexico oil and gas exploration to resume following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The groups are targeting 10 permits that the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement granted to oil and gas exploration projects since Oct. 15. The seismic exploration surveys generate deafening underwater noises that can cause hearing loss and otherwise harm endangered sperm whales and other marine mammals, the groups said in a 60-day notice of intent to sue filed with the federal agencies.

The groups -- the Natural Resources Defense Council, Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club and Gulf Restoration Network -- said the permits violate the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. The suit, they said, will go forward unless corrective action is taken.

Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has placed the interests of the oil companies above those of the environment in trying to appease an industry that fumed over the shutdown of operations in the Gulf following last summer's oil spill.

"Under Salazar's watch, the Department of the Interior has treated the Gulf of Mexico as a sacrifice zone where laws are disregarded and wildlife protection takes a backseat to oil-company profits," Sakashita said. "Even after the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, the feds are still violating the laws intended to protect the Gulf's wildlife in their rush to approve offshore oil activities."

Interior Department spokeswoman Kendra Barkoff declined to comment, since the issue involved potential litigation.