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Environmentalists to sue over new Gulf oil, gas projects

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The Interior Department has approved 10 oil and gas exploration projects in the Gulf of Mexico since October in violation of two laws that protect whales and other marine mammals, environmental groups said Thursday.

The projects were approved without the permits required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Gulf Restoration Network, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club said in a formal notice of their intent to sue the government.

"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," Miyoko Sakashita, the oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release.

Kendra Barkoff, an Interior Department spokeswoman, said officials wouldn't comment.

The environmental groups said the seismic testing that oil companies use to search for oil can cause hearing loss in marine mammals, drive them away from feeding grounds and disturb their breeding.

The Gulf of Mexico is home to endangered sperm whales. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says sperm whales are the only endangered whales commonly found there. The environmental groups said in their letter that five other whale species listed under the law as endangered also inhabit the Gulf.

"It is intolerable to think that the same species threatened by the Gulf spill will have to contend with the industry's constant pounding, without

any serious attempt to mitigate the harm," said Michael Jasny, a senior policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The groups' letter also charges that the government violated the Endangered Species Act by failing to account adequately for the impact of an oil spill and of the noise from oil exploration and production when it created a five-year oil- and gas-leasing program for 2007-2012 in the central and western Gulf of Mexico.

The groups said their suit would be filed against the Department of Interior; the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement; the National Marine Fisheries Service; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and the Department of Commerce.