

VICE NEWS

Protesters Take Over Federal Auction of Oil and Gas Leases in the Gulf of Mexico



RIGHT NOW: #KeepItInTheGround action shutting down @BOEM_DOI NOLA oil auction!
#NoNewLeases (photo: @HighTechAztec)

By Matt Smith
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Protesters opposing new oil and gas drilling in the Gulf of Mexico disrupted a federal auction of new offshore leases Wednesday, swarming the New Orleans landmark where the bids were being taken.

The demonstrators rallied outside the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, where the Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) was auctioning off 45 million acres of Gulf sea floor for new exploration. About half of the crowd, which organizers estimated at more than 200, went inside, chanting "Keep it in the ground,"

“Don’t auction our climate,” and “This Gulf is not for profit,” said Anne Rolfes, founding director of the environmental group Louisiana Bucket Brigade.

“They were laughing when we were walking in the door, and once they started seeing us pour through they stopped laughing,” Rolfes said. “The oil industry received a serious message today.”

About 10 protesters took over the stage in the meeting room, while others attempted to drown out the auction with chanting, said Ruth Breech, senior climate and energy campaigner for the Rainforest Action Network. The protesters on stage had been willing to be arrested to make their point, but no arrests were made, Breech said.

BOEM spokesman John Filostrat said the lease sale “was successfully conducted and concluded” despite the protest. The auction netted \$156 million for 128 tracts, which covered just under 700,000 acres of the seafloor off Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, BOEM reported.

Offshore wells in the Gulf provide about 17 percent of US crude oil production, according to the US Energy Information Administration. The industry is also a major employer on the Gulf Coast, providing or supporting up to a quarter of a million jobs, according to industry estimates.

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But opponents have been more outspoken since the Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010, which killed 11 workers and uncorked the worst offshore oil spill in US history, and organizers said Wednesday’s demonstration marked a turning point.

“People have woken up,” Rolfes said. “We’ve always known this was hurting us, but now we’re also willing to act.”

Last week, the Obama administration included new sections of the Gulf of Mexico for possible oil exploration in its proposed offshore drilling program for the next five years, even as it cut off the Atlantic coast and limited exploration off Alaska.

Valerie Love, a clean energy campaigner for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said many residents are tired of the Gulf being treated as a “sacrifice zone,” an area written off for the sake of profits.

“The Gulf has never seen this kind of massive protest brought to the heart of the auction rooms, where the waters are being sold off to oil and gas companies,” Love said. “It’s a huge stride forward.” She said her organization has attended every federal lease sale so far this year, “And we’re going to be at every single one going forward.”