

the guardian

Obama's offshore drilling puts whales and dolphins in peril, groups warn

Oliver Milman

Wednesday 24 August 2016

Environmental groups warn president's climate legacy could be at risk over research showing areas cleared for oil and gas extraction contain marine life

Environmental groups have turned on the Obama administration over offshore oil and gas extraction, warning it puts whales and dolphins in peril and risks undermining the president's commitment to putting the brakes on climate change.

Barack Obama, who recently called global warming an "genuine existential threat", has enjoyed largely solid support from green groups that have praised his leadership on the issue. But Obama's environmentalist allies are increasingly frustrated over federally approved fossil fuel drilling, just as the US president attempts to put the finishing touches on his climate legacy.



Research shows bottlenose dolphins, fin, humpback (seen here) and sperm whales are all present in areas deemed suitable for the airgun testing. Photograph: Miguel Medina/AFP/Getty Images

On Wednesday, leases for oil and gas exploration across 23.8m acres of the Gulf of Mexico will be auctioned off to fossil fuel companies. A total of 218.94m acres, about double the size of California, will have been offered up for leases in federal waters by the end of next year, with further leasing planned by the government in a new five-year program that will extend this process.

In response, protesters stormed the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's office in New Orleans on Tuesday, demanding the cancellation of the lease sales because of the link between climate change and the kind of flooding that has devastated large parts of Louisiana. Several protesters were arrested.

“While climate change affects everyone, communities of color and low-income communities continue to be hit hardest by the lasting impacts of climate disasters,” said Anne Rolfes, founding director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade.

“Thousands of oil spills, sinking lands and extreme weather creating turmoil for countless people. What more will convince the Obama administration to stop treating the Gulf like a sacrifice zone to fossil fuel interests?”

Another green group, the Center for Biological Diversity, is also ramping up its opposition to offshore drilling, releasing a report that found that burning all of the fossil fuels in federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico would release a staggering 32.8bn tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The group claimed that expanding drilling in the gulf is contrary to America’s pledge to help keep global temperatures to 1.5C above pre-industrial times and risks unleashing more extreme weather, drought and sea level rise upon swathes of the US.

“We can’t address climate change while expanding drilling the gulf. This report shows that new oil and gas leasing in the gulf would be a carbon bomb that will deepen our climate crisis,” said Kristen Monsell, oceans attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “President Obama needs to align his energy and climate policies before leaving office, starting in the gulf.”

In March, activists disrupted a lease sale in New Orleans, chanting “shut it down” and brandishing banners in front of bidding companies. The action didn’t disrupt the process, however, with BOEM now overseeing around 4,400 active leases in the Gulf of Mexico.

Conservationists are also fretting over the impact of oil and gas exploration in the Atlantic Ocean. While the federal government has ruled out any drilling off the eastern seaboard in the immediate future, seismic airgun blasting is still being pursued by companies in waters stretching from Delaware to Florida.

Research from Duke University’s Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab has been released as animated maps by green group Oceana, showing that bottlenose dolphins, fin, humpback and sperm whales are all present in areas deemed suitable for the airgun testing.

A number of leading marine scientists have warned that airgun testing, where air is fired at the seabed to determine if oil or gas deposits reside there, can be extremely harmful to the ability of whales and dolphins to communicate with each other or find food. The Obama administration has been pressured to end the practice.

“These maps confirm what we’ve long feared, that dolphins and whales along the east coast are at risk from dangerous seismic airgun blasting for oil and gas,” said Claire Douglass, campaign director at Oceana.

“Hearing that whales and dolphins could be injured is one thing, but seeing the scale of the threat is another. President Obama should stop seismic airgun blasting and protect our coast.”

But fossil fuel companies have warned against any winding down of offshore drilling, claiming that it creates jobs and helps the US become less dependent on energy sources from other countries.

“If we are going to continue to drive investment in America, create jobs, and provide affordable energy, we must look to the future,” said Louis Finkel, executive vice president of the American Petroleum Institute, which supports a US “energy renaissance” by drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

This stance has been embraced by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who has an “America first” energy policy that would drastically ramp up domestic coal, oil and gas production. His rival Hillary Clinton has promised a swift transition to clean energy sources but has come under fire from progressives for her ties to the oil and gas industry and for leaving the door open to fracking.