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Trump plan to expand Gulf drilling ignores impacts on wildlife, lawsuit claims

BY JENNY STALETOVICH

A handful of environmental groups sued the Trump administration Thursday for failing to protect whales, sea turtles and other marine life in the Gulf of Mexico even as it pushes to expand drilling amid safety cutbacks.

In a lawsuit filed in federal court in Tampa, Earthjustice claimed the administration has yet to complete a long overdue study of hazards to wildlife from drilling following the 2010 explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig.

The explosion, which left 11 workers dead, dumped at least three million barrels of oil into the Gulf, killing baby dolphins, causing heart problems in mahi mahi and leaving a trail of damage to marine life, from plankton to shrimp to oysters, that scientists are still trying to understand.

"You've got whales and sea turtles that not only have to contend with the everyday operations of drilling, but they have to rebuild their populations," said Earthjustice attorney Chris Eaton.

Following the spill, the Obama administration agreed to take another look at impacts from drilling. When it failed to complete a study by 2013, environmentalists sued. Wildlife officials agreed to complete it by 2015. It was never done.

A new assessment is even more critical now following Trump's move to undo Obama drilling bans and aggressively expand efforts, Eaton said. Earlier this year, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke announced plans to quadruple drilling in U.S. water, including Florida's Atlantic coast and in the eastern Gulf, where drilling was banned in 1988. Zinke quickly withdrew the plan after meeting with Gov. Rick Scott in what critics called an election-year stunt.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and the Gulf Restoration Network, asks the court to order the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complete a new study in three months. The study would likely lead to new protections for endangered species given the breadth of the 2010 spill, Earthjustice said.

"They opened up unleased acreage in the Gulf. They have reduced royalty rates in shallow water to entice companies to drill there. They're rolling back safety regulations," Eaton said. "They're doing all they can to make it a lot more appealing for the gas companies to drill in the Gulf...and that's a bigger threat to the species."