

http://www.tampabay.com/news/courts/civil/Environmental-lawsuit-targets-Trump-administration-over-offshore-oil-in-Gulf-of-Mexico_169328359

Environmental lawsuit targets Trump administration over offshore oil in Gulf of Mexico

TAMPA — After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, a pair of federal wildlife agencies agreed to reassess the environmental impact of offshore energy production in the region.

Eight years later, that assessment has yet to happen. On Thursday, the delay prompted a coalition of environmental groups to file a lawsuit against the Trump administration.

The suit, filed in U.S. District Court in Tampa, targets the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It seeks to have a judge order the agencies to complete the environmental assessment, as required by the Endangered Species Act.

The plaintiffs are the Gulf Restoration Network, the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity, all nonprofit environmental advocacy groups.

“This issue is in the broader context of the Trump administration going pedal-to-the-metal with offshore drilling without regard for the environmental impact,” said Chris Eaton, an attorney for Earthjustice, the environmental law firm that filed the suit.

The Endangered Species Act requires the agencies to conduct a consultation with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management to investigate whether oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico will seriously harm threatened and endangered species.

The gulf is home to many varieties of fish, whales, sea turtles, coral, and other marine life, some of which are considered threatened or endangered due to their sparse populations.

The last time the agencies conducted such a consultation was in 2007, according to the lawsuit. In 2010, after the Deepwater Horizon disaster disrupted the ecosystem and killed countless wildlife, the agencies agreed a new assessment was warranted.

But the process was consistently delayed. The Fisheries Service promised a final biological assessment by Oct. 31, 2014, according to the lawsuit. But that date came and went with no new information.

“We don’t know what would be in that analysis,” Eaton said. “But a good biological opinion would force the agencies to limit certain activity.”

Meanwhile, new oil exploration and production in the gulf has continued. At the same time, scientists continue to discover new harmful effects from the 2010 oil spill.

A spokeswoman for the Fisheries Service declined to comment on the lawsuit. The Fish and Wildlife Service referred a reporter to the U.S. Department of Justice, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Trump administration has sought to enhance America's standing in the world energy markets by brushing away barriers to offshore oil and gas drilling.

This week, President Donald Trump repealed the National Ocean Policy, an Obama-era executive order that was enacted after the 2010 oil spill. The Obama administration's policy focused heavily on conservation and climate change.

In rescinding the policy, Trump emphasized industries that use oceans and encouraged more oil drilling in the nation's waterways.

Contact Dan Sullivan at dsullivan@tampabay.com.