

# Environmental groups sue to stall latest Gulf of Mexico oil lease sale

• BY ANTHONY MCAULEY

Environmental groups have filed a new complaint against the federal government in an attempt to stall the sale of offshore Gulf of Mexico oil and gas leases, arguing that coastal residents haven't had their say as required by environmental law, especially since the Trump administration began rolling back regulations that were put in place after the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

The filing is the latest move in a year-long campaign by Earth Justice, Healthy Gulf, the Sierra Club and the **Center for Biodiversity**, which are collectively suing the Department of the Interior in an effort to force it to conduct a National Environmental Policy Act environmental impact study before it proceeds with further lease auctions.

The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management regularly auctions offshore blocks in the Gulf of Mexico's federal waters for exploration. Its next one is scheduled for Aug. 21, when about 78 million acres are up for bids.

## Federal government to offer 77.8M acres in Gulf of Mexico for August oil, gas lease sale

The environmentalist group first sued in August last year in the Washington, D.C., district court, arguing that environmental impact studies have been inadequate. While past experience suggests the court will not block the auction this month, the environmentalists are hoping to add pressure on the court to rule this November on the main question of whether a new NEPA study is required before any new development of Gulf of Mexico exploration blocks.

"It's all about ensuring people's right to be heard and their right to know what the environmental impacts (of further drilling) will be and to ensure government studies it properly," said Brettney Hardy, the Earth Justice lawyer who is leading the case.

The Department of the Interior, which didn't respond to requests for comment, has previously argued that it conducts environmental studies at various stages of the process and that it would be inappropriate to do so at the auction phase.

The crux of the environmentalists' case is that the government has not fulfilled past promises to consider environmental impacts, and that the Trump administration has rolled back rules that were put in place three years ago in the wake of reports on the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010. Those rule changes have, in fact, been challenged in a separate lawsuit by Earth Justice and other environmental activist groups, which was filed in June.

The plaintiffs also argue that the Trump Administration's "America-First Offshore Energy Strategy," put in place last year, made other changes to the Gulf of Mexico lease regime, including making a much bigger acreage available at lower prices, that will have consequences for the environment.

"What is most concerning, is that they are arguing that they have done an environmental impact study but they point to one that was done before they started to roll back all the regulations," said Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of Healthy Gulf. "It's very frustrating. They are acting as if nothing has changed since Deepwater Horizon."

Both the American Petroleum Institute, the oil producers' lobby group, and Chevron Corp., which has large interests in the Gulf of Mexico, have joined Interior as interested parties in the case.

The API said it didn't comment on ongoing litigation.

Chevron said via a statement: "An injunction preventing Chevron from exercising its rightfully-obtained lease rights is not legally appropriate."