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OFFSHORE DRILLING

Trump's leasing plan faces new court challenge

Pamela King,

Environmentalists yesterday mounted a new legal attack against the Trump administration's efforts to lease as much offshore acreage as it can to oil and gas developers.

Healthy Gulf, the Sierra Club and the **Center for Biological Diversity** filed a **supplemental complaint** in their U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia challenge of a March sale that opened 78 million acres of the Gulf of Mexico to energy industry bidders (***Energywire***, March 14).

Since that time, Trump's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management has announced plans to once again put all available Gulf acreage on the auction block on Aug. 21. This month's sale is the focus of yesterday's supplemental filing.

"Ignoring the damage the oil industry does to the Gulf environment is reckless and illegal," Kristen Monsell, oceans program legal director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement yesterday. "Marine life, coastal communities and our climate are all paying a terrible price as this region is treated like a sacrifice zone."

BOEM relied on the same inadequate environmental reviews to support the August and March lease sales, attorneys for Earthjustice argued on behalf of the green groups.

They say BOEM improperly based some of its conclusions in the National Environmental Policy Act analyses on now-defunct regulations like the Interior Department's well-control rule and EPA's Clean Power Plan.

Earthjustice has represented the same environmental organizations in a separate challenge of large offshore lease sales the Trump administration held in 2018. A ruling is expected later this year.

The groups noted that the Trump administration is doing everything it can to expand drilling in the Gulf as it faces judicial roadblocks to its efforts to open up development off Alaska and the East Coast (***Energywire***, April 1).

"A court ruled that President Trump exceeded his authority and violated the law trying to open up the Arctic and Atlantic," Earthjustice attorney Brettney Hardy said in a statement. "Meanwhile, the administration is doubling down on the harm and impacts on the Gulf of Mexico, endangering Gulf communities, the environment, and workers."

Interior, which houses BOEM, is appealing the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska's decision to preserve Obama-era drilling bans in the Atlantic and Arctic oceans.