

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 20, 2010

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to urge you to abandon plans for any offshore oil and gas development within proposed Virginia Lease Sale 220 because, not only would it pose enormous environmental and economic risks to our states, but it would also jeopardize our military readiness in a time of war. As you know, the coast of Virginia is a critical operational and testing area for the United States Navy.

The Department of Defense has determined that more than three-quarters of the area within Virginia Lease Sale 220 is currently being used for military operations that are utterly incompatible with oil and gas activity. We are attaching a briefing based on a report from the Department of Defense that demonstrates that 72% of the lease sale area is currently being used by the Navy for training, testing, gunnery exercises and other operations that cannot support any oil and gas activity. Oil and gas surface structures on an additional 5% of the lease sale area would also interfere with naval operations.

As you know, the Department of Defense has long opposed encroachment of offshore drilling activities on the Navy's Virginia Capes Operating Area (VACAPES) because it is a critically important testing and training range, as well as an essential operating area. The Navy has been training in this area—in the waters off the world's largest naval base at Norfolk—for nearly a century because it is an optimal place to operate in a safe and controlled environment. Realistic training is the single greatest asset the military has in preparing its personnel for combat. Any interference with these training activities jeopardizes our military readiness.

In addition, VACAPES is the Navy's primary area for testing certain kinds of weapons and ship technologies. Specifically, VACAPES is the designated area for the evaluation of missile launches, which requires wide areas clear of development to allow these missiles to land safely. It is also the Navy's primary area to test autonomous underwater vehicles. Offshore oil drilling in the area could severely impair the Navy's ability to develop and maintain critical combat technologies.

If we do allow this lease sale to go forward on the small area where the Navy is not operating, oil and gas exploration could still interfere with our military readiness. Imagine if the spill in the Gulf of Mexico happened within Lease Sale 220. Not only would it threaten the environment, valuable fisheries, and an enormous tourism industry, but such a spill would also halt all training and testing activities in the VACAPES for months. Such a disruption in a time of war is simply a risk we should not take.

For these reasons as well as the obvious environmental and economic hazards associated with the plan, we urge you to eliminate this proposed lease sale. We appreciate that you have postponed plans to move forward with this lease sale in light of the safety and environmental concerns revealed in the ongoing Gulf oil spill disaster. It should be noted, however, that even if you could guarantee the safety of oil and gas rigs and platforms—a guarantee that neither your Administration nor the oil company executives that appeared before Senate committees were willing to provide—their very presence off the coast of Virginia would still interfere with ongoing naval operations in the area. The risks to our national security are simply too high. We urge you to abandon all plans for oil and gas exploration and development in this area.

Sincerely,



ROBERT MENENDEZ  
United States Senator



FRANK LAUTENBERG  
United States Senator



BARBARA MIKULSKI  
United States Senator



BENJAMIN CARDIN  
United States Senator