

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

August 3, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

On July 3, 2017, the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management (BOEM) announced the first steps in the development of a new 2019-2024 Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program, despite BOEM's finalization of a 2017-2022 OCS leasing program six months earlier. As your Administration undertakes a Request for Information and subsequent comment period, we write to strongly oppose any efforts to expand offshore oil and gas drilling into the Atlantic Ocean, which would threaten New Jersey's vibrant coastal communities.

The economic consequences of an oil spill near the New Jersey coastline would be catastrophic. In 2016 New Jersey's tourism industry generated over \$44 billion, directly supported over 321,000 jobs, and indirectly supported more than 517,000 jobs—a total of nearly 10% of the state's workforce¹. The revenue generated by this tourism produced \$4.9 billion in state and local taxes and \$5.6 billion in federal taxes. Also critical to the state's economic health is our fishing industry. In 2015, New Jersey's seafood industry supported over 31,000 jobs, and the state is home to one of the largest saltwater recreational fishing industries in the nation². Beyond our workforce, New Jersey's residential and commercial coastal properties are valued at nearly \$800 billion³—assets that could be wiped out in the event of an oil spill.

The reopening of this process not only endangers New Jersey's coastal economy, but also ignores the will of the local communities that would be most impacted by oil drilling—including over 120 municipalities, 1,200 elected officials, 41,000 businesses, and 500,000 fishing families from up and down the Atlantic coast who have all voiced their opposition to oil and gas activities⁴. During your confirmation hearing, you stated that “we all love our public lands, and the duty of the Department of the Interior... is to make sure we have a broad consensus for what we are doing.” It is clear that, if a broad consensus exists on this issue, it stands in opposition to offshore drilling.

¹ <http://www.visitnj.org/sites/default/master/files/2016-nj-economic-impact.pdf>

² http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/Assets/economics/publications/FEUS/FEUS-2015/Report-Chapters/FEUS%202015-AllChapters_Final.pdf

³ <http://www.air-worldwide.com/Press-Releases/AIR-Worldwide-Updates-Coastline-at-Risk-Report/>

⁴ <http://usa.oceana.org/climate-and-energy/grassroots-opposition-offshore-drilling-and-exploration-atlantic-ocean-and>

As we learned all too clearly in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon tragedy, offshore drilling poses a substantial risk of economic and environmental devastation for our shoreline communities that rely on a healthy ocean for their livelihood. The economy and ecology of the Gulf are still suffering from the lingering impacts of the spill; the recovery process is likely to continue for many years to come. The risks of a similar catastrophe were recently underscored by members of the bipartisan National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, who unanimously oppose the accelerated leasing schedule and the rollback of drilling safety regulations contemplated in Executive Order 13795⁵.

Deepwater Horizon is not an isolated example—over 25 years after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, up to 27,000 gallons of crude lingered in the areas where the spill occurred⁶, and there is compelling evidence that the spill could still lead to the extinction of one subpopulation of the iconic orca whale⁷. In the event of an oil spill that hit New Jersey's coast, the damage would be both enormously costly and potentially permanent.

In addition to the long-term impacts of these spills, they also have the ability to damage a broad geographic area. Oil spills do not respect state boundaries, and drilling anywhere along the Atlantic Coast poses a significant risk for all eastern seaboard states. As the coastal economies of four states were damaged by the BP oil spill, it is likely that any oil spill in the Atlantic would threaten states up and down the coast.

During the development of the existing 2017-2022 OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) also raised their own serious concerns about proposed Atlantic drilling interfering in their operations. In a report to BOEM, DOD stated that they would require restrictions on oil and gas use over the entire proposed project area in the Atlantic, stretching from Virginia to Georgia, and categorized 10% of that area as being entirely incompatible with either all oil and gas activities or permanent oil and gas surface structures⁸. Similarly, in NASA's public comments on BOEM's Request for Information, the agency maintained that there would be major impacts to NASA operations from drilling off of much of the Virginia and North Carolina coasts, with moderate impacts extending well beyond that area⁹.

In addition to the economic and defense concerns, offshore oil drilling threatens permanent and devastating degradation to our environment and natural resources. The Jersey Shore is a priceless natural treasure, providing recreation to generations of families and supporting a thriving ecosystem of marine mammals and sea life. New Jersey's 130 miles of coastline house a diverse array of marine life, and provide critical habitat to several federally endangered and threatened species of fish, birds and turtles. We owe it to future generations to ensure that our pristine natural resources are preserved and protected.

⁵ <http://oscaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Secretary-Zinke-letter.pdf>

⁶ http://www.evostc.state.ak.us/Universal/Documents/Publications/04-05-16_March_2016_LO_Update.pdf

⁷ http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/Exxon_Valdez_25YearsAfter_508_0.pdf

⁸ <https://www.boem.gov/2017-2022-DoD-OCS-Report/>

⁹ <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=BOEM-2014-0059-1341>

Following the unprecedented devastation of Hurricane Sandy, we are still working every day to rebuild our homes, our businesses, and our way of life. It is critical that we focus on long-term efforts to improve resiliency and to limit the carbon pollution that can drive extreme and unpredictable weather. Recovering from a natural disaster of this magnitude is challenging, and New Jersey is committed to rebuilding and coming back stronger than ever. Yet allowing for offshore oil and gas drilling poses the threat of a manmade disaster that our communities and environment cannot afford.

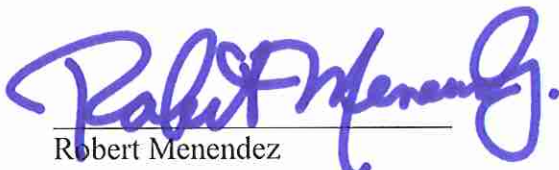
New Jersey's coast has faced manmade disaster before. When medical waste washed up on our beaches in 1988, New Jersey saw a 22% decline in tourism and estimated lost revenues of over \$1 billion¹⁰. This type of environmental contamination is significantly easier to clean up and remediate than an oil spill, and we fear that any spill would be even more catastrophic for our environment and vital industries.

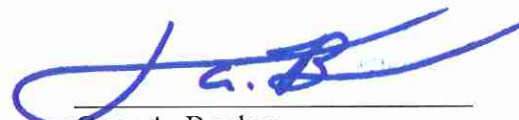
On February 4, 2016, BOEM finalized two leases in federal waters with private companies for offshore wind development, the first such leases off New Jersey's coast. These are the type of projects that the federal government should be encouraging through the use of public lands as our country works to reduce our carbon output and transition to a clean energy economy. We would encourage your Administration and BOEM to continue to capitalize on the incredible potential of offshore wind and other clean and limitless sources to meet our energy needs, and look for similar opportunities to expand renewable energy development on the Outer Continental Shelf.

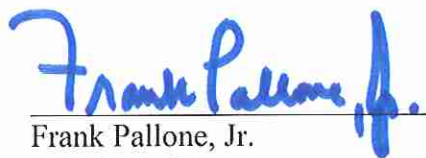
We believe strongly that the potential for significant and lasting hardship to New Jersey's workforce, our coastal resources, and our communities far outweighs any benefits that the already-profitable oil companies would receive with expanded drilling opportunities. Given these concerns, we oppose the inclusion of any and all of the Atlantic planning areas in the draft plan.

Thank you for your consideration of this vital request.

Sincerely,


Robert Menendez
United States Senator


Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

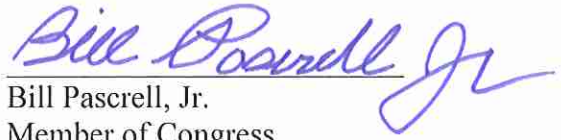

Frank Pallone, Jr.
Member of Congress


Albio Sires
Member of Congress

¹⁰ http://swfsc.noaa.gov/publications/TM/SWFSC/NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-154_P811.PDF



Donald Norcross
Member of Congress



Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress



Bonnie Watson-Coleman
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