NCEL Frequently Asked Questions
OFFSHORE DRILLING

CLIMATE & ENERGY

1. What is offshore drilling?

Offshore drilling is the process used to obtain oil and gas from beneath the seabed in coastal waters. It requires a variety of technologies and infrastructure including seismic testing for exploration, drilling wells and rigs for oil and gas recovery, and pipelines for transport.

2. What is seismic testing?

Seismic testing is the first step in oil and gas exploration. Devices known as seismic airguns are towed behind ships and send loud blasts of compressed air through the water into the seabed. These airwaves reflect information back to the ship about the location of oil and gas deposits. These blasts are harmful to marine mammals, fish, and other wildlife. They disrupt mating and feeding, kill fish eggs and larvae and result in marine mammal death. They have been shown to decrease catch rates of certain species of fish by 40 to 80 percent.

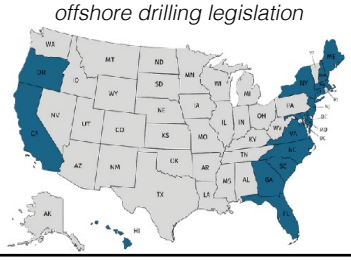
3. How much untapped oil is there offshore?

Supporters of offshore drilling believe that unexplored regions, such as areas in the Atlantic Ocean, have abundant, untapped reserves. Yet the majority of projections have found minimal resources in these regions.

4. Is it still profitable to extract this untapped oil?

No. Offshore drilling is not only a high risk activity, but it is also exceptionally expensive and time consuming. Electrification is swiftly moving forward and renewables, such as wind and solar, have become cost competitive with the oil industry. For the same reason, industry giants - like Chevron and BP - are investing billions in renewables.

States that have introduced or passed offshore drilling legislation



5. What harm does offshore drilling have?

While drilling does occasionally bring drilling-specific jobs to coastal communities, it often hurts jobs depending on clean and healthy coastlines such as fishing or tourism. The environmental damage from daily offshore drilling operations includes pollution from onshore infrastructure (pipelines, refineries, powerlines, etc.) and harm to marine life from seismic exploration. In addition, pursuing offshore drilling increases the risk of oil spills like Deepwater Horizon (2010) or Exxon Valdez (1989).

6. What is the current state of offshore drilling in the US?

Only a few days into his presidency, President Biden signed a sweeping executive order halting all new offshore drilling in federal waters. The executive order also included protecting 30% of our oceans and doubling offshore wind energy by 2030. Multiple bills have been introduced in Congress to permanently restrict offshore drilling in every major body of water bordering the United States, including the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans, as well as parts of the Gulf of Mexico. To date, 16 states have considered legislation to restrict offshore drilling, 10 have passed legislation opposing offshore drilling, and 5 states are currently considering such legislation. To learn more, please visit NCEL's website.

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