Government lists at least 100 sites offshore where regulators approved the controversial exploration method

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Exclusive: Extent of stealth fracking in Gulf of Mexico revealed

In “The Disappearing Delta,” “Fault Lines” investigates the impact of the fossil fuel industry on Louisiana’s disappearing coastline — and examines a new frontier of oil exploration: fracking in the Gulf of Mexico. The film airs on Monday, Feb. 16, at 10 p.m. Eastern time/7 p.m. Pacific on Al Jazeera America. | Click here (http://america.aljazeera.com/tools/channel-finder.html) to find Al Jazeera in your area.
While a debate rages over the use of hydraulic fracturing to exploit fossil fuel reserves inland, the practice has quietly taken hold offshore, in the Gulf of Mexico.

Documents obtained by “Fault Lines” reveal that the world’s largest oil firms are now fracking in some of the Gulf’s deepest waters — raising questions about how it is being regulated.

A list of about 100 well sites (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659715-2013-fracking-sites.html) offers one of the first snapshots of the practice, which until just a couple years ago was unknown to the public.

“There’s been a level of secrecy that’s shielded this activity from view, literally and figuratively,” said Jonathan Henderson, who works for New Orleans’ Gulf Restoration Network. “This activity is taking place offshore, and the public can’t get out here [to see it].”

The list of sites obtained by “Fault Lines” reveals that BP, ConocoPhillips, Shell and nearly two dozen other companies were approved to use offshore fracking in 2013. It also reveals that fracking has occurred in the vicinity of the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon spill. Chevron, which operates several nearshore rigs visited by a “Fault Lines” team in January, said it also uses offshore fracking “safely and efficiently” at its deepest water sites (http://www.chevron.com/documents/pdf/JSMInfographic.pdf).

**Offshore fracking in the Gulf of Mexico**

*Sites where deepwater fracking has taken place, according to the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement*
The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) released the list of offshore fracking sites to “Fault Lines,” noting that it was not exhaustive and included sites only where the most common type of offshore fracking is used.

This technique, dubbed frac packing, has been used offshore for decades and employs highly pressurized water, gravel and chemicals to clear sand from the opening of the well and facilitate the flow of fossil fuels. According to BSEE officials, this is the type of fracking that takes place the “vast majority” of the time in the Gulf and is different from the method that has stirred debate onshore.

But the officials acknowledged in a written statement that a more expansive type of fracking, “involving higher fluid volumes and extending longer distances from the wellbore has been minimally used in the Gulf of Mexico.”

An October report in Bloomberg (http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-07/deep-water-fracking-next-frontier-for-offshore-drilling) describes an emerging fracking technology taking hold at deepwater sites, which can involve harder rock formations
described by a Halliburton engineer as “the most challenging, harshest environment that we’ll be working in.”

BSEE officials say hydraulic fracturing has the potential to increase as companies explore at more extreme depths. “BSEE is vigilant in its efforts to consider all the complexities of offshore energy development and allow for the responsible development and safe operations,” the statement read.

After months of requests for more information about this type of offshore fracking, regulators refused to offer details.

In fact, in response to early inquiries, officials at BSEE referred “Fault Lines” to materials produced by the very industry they’re charged with overseeing — pointing to the websites of three oil companies and a fact sheet produced by the American Petroleum Institute (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659716-api-offshore-hydraulic-fracturing.html), the nation’s largest oil lobbying group.

**Concerns from California**

Scrutiny of offshore fracking is growing, especially on the heels of reports by Truthout (http://truth-out.org/news/item/17765-special-investigation-fracking-in-the-ocean-off-the-california-coast) and The Associated Press (http://bigstory.ap.org/article/calif-finds-more-instances-offshore-fracking) in 2013, which revealed that the practice was quietly permitted at hundreds of sites off the coast of California.

In addition to the fracking methods, environmentalists want to know the types of chemicals being used. Companies are not required to disclose that information to the public, and very few have volunteered it.
Environmental observers in California, however, obtained a list of chemicals used at 12 offshore fracking sites off its coast. Almost all the substances can cause damage to organs in the human body, said Miyoko Sakashita, an environmental lawyer in San Francisco.

“Half of the chemicals impacted the cardiovascular or immune system, and about a third caused some sort of brain damage or nerve system damage,” she said, adding that fracking offshore can increase the risk of an oil spill as well as air and water pollution.

The agencies charged with overseeing offshore oil activity say that companies are allowed to discharge a certain amount of fracking chemicals under the terms of a general wastewater permit issued by the Environmental Protection Agency. Additional wastewater is often stored and treated onshore.

In late 2014, two California-based groups, the Environmental Defense Center and the Center for Biological Diversity, prepared lawsuits against federal regulators for approving permits in violation of environmental law.

“One of our key concerns is that offshore fracking has barely been regulated at all,” said Sakashita, who works for the Center for Biological Diversity. “What we’ve found was that the federal government was largely just rubber-stamping permits.”

**Fast-tracked permits**

The Center for Biological Diversity points to a 2012 fracking permit ([https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659714-fracking-categoricalexclusion.html](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659714-fracking-categoricalexclusion.html)) filed by the oil and gas exploration company DCOR. It shows that regulators approved fracking through a fast-track process called a categorical exclusion, which exempts industry activities from a full environmental review.

—Mike Tidwell
environmental writer
Companies have lobbied for this exemption, arguing that it helps cut down on paperwork that can slow operations. After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, it was discovered that operations at the BP site were approved using a categorical exclusion (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659717-categoricalexclusions-bpdeepwaterhorizon.html) — and that the company lobbied regulators (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659712-bpletterrecategoricalexclusions.html) to continue using the exemptions just 11 days before the spill.

Soon after the accident, Michael Bromwich, the head of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, announced (http://www.doi.gov/news/pressreleases/Categorical-Exclusions-for-Gulf-Offshore-Activity-to-be-Limited-While-Interior-Reviews-NEPA-Process-and-Develops-Revised-Policy.cfm) that the agency would curb its use of the exclusions and begin a process to review how they’re dispensed.

But environmental critics say regulators have not kept promises to tighten oversight.

“Almost nothing has changed,” said Mike Tidwell, who has written extensively on climate change in Louisiana. “There seems to be no slowdown in the momentum of regulators and government politicians to drill, baby, drill.”

Chevron, which obtained approval to frack at least 11 offshore sites in 2013, also lobbied federal regulators soon after the Deepwater Horizon spill to continue fast tracking permits.
When regulators opened a public review of categorical exclusions, Chevron representative J. Keith Couvillion wrote a letter (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1659713-chevronletterrecategoricalexclusion.html) urging regulators to “avoid duplicative, wasteful and time-consuming efforts.” He argued that “the framework already in place should continue to be used.”

Regulators say their review of categorical exclusions is ongoing and that exemptions continue to be used — but only after considering extraordinary circumstances like whether the operation in question involves the use of a “new or unusual technology.”

“We still don’t know the dangers involved,” said environmental watchdog Henderson. “And we in the Gulf, we have a right to know because its our home, it’s our culture, it’s our tradition. Everything is at risk.”

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Plain, simple, truthful, clean renewable energy is the answer for civilization.
God's living beings require clean breathable air, clean potable (sustainable) water! Fossil fuels must be phased out of use on earth if earth is to survive. Greed and lust will kill Mother Earth and all that pertains to Mother Earth. Drilling and Fracking for crude oil and natural gas have faults (real consequence problems) that are serious and to numerous to list here. Coal & Tar Sand Oil extraction are destroying Mother Earth. Wake Up, come to your senses inhabitants of this Earth!

Rick Carufel 6 days ago
One can only assume that these fracking operation are freely discharging their toxic, radioactive waste directly into the gulf with total disregard for the environment

Todd Nelson 6 days ago
An article from a government controlled "news" organization has to be questioned. Especially when that government doesn't want competition from the US in the oil business. The US has put a serious dent in Qatar's profits and has made OPEC's stranglehold on oil prices disappear. This article is plain and simple propaganda to stop US companies from competing with the Arabs in the oil business so OPEC can drive up prices.

Justice Escambia 3 days ago
Who do you think owns the media: 6 companies own all of the media... The Santa Barbara News wrote this article, the Al Jazeera was the only news outlet that has the freedom to publish these back room deals that are impacting all of us. We have clean energy -- use it!
Lets see how much of EARTH we can screw-up. For what other than $$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$ US GOV & Big Oil Co.

REPLY

And just think what an oil friendly Federal Administration would allow, instead of this trickle of effort.

REPLY

By Wednesday, May 28th, almost all the fish have decomposed and officials said there are no plans to investigate the fish kill any further.

Reduced oxygen levels are most commonly caused by factors such as drought, algae bloom, overpopulation, or a sustained increase in water temperature. This is not the first such report coming from Galveston Bay in recent years.

Thousands of dead fish, most of them Gulf Menhaden, or shad fish, washed ashore along the Texas coast.

REPLY

Why didn't the article list the fracking chemicals?

REPLY

They don't want you to know like the Chems in Chemtrails - But I know 47 of them and they're not good for you or I.
The biggest opponents in the world of fracking are Russia, Venezuela and the Middle East producers. If they don’t stop the evolution of this fracking technology revolution, almost every country in the world would become independent of them.

Looking at the self interest, it’s easy to think that these deep pocket beneficiaries are probably the biggest source of “black money” going into activists’ pockets.

Al Jazeera knows which side its interests are on. There have been about a million fracking events around the world in the last 20 years, but the problems they site are small and have little to do with the fracking itself. Note in my area, we have methane in our groundwater and soils and no fracking.