Drilling leases lurk 25 miles off PCB

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John Henderson | The News Herald, Panama City, Fla.

PANAMA CITY BEACH — As federal officials discuss possible leases with companies to drill for oil or natural gas more than 125 miles offshore Panama City Beach, several drilling opponents said they were unaware there already are active leases as close as 25 miles from Panama City Beach.

Within 60 miles of the coastline of Panama City Beach are 10 areas the federal government already leased out to oil companies, allowing them to drill for oil and natural gas. But officials contacted last week say the chances of drilling occurring on those are slim to none in the current political climate and in the wake of the public’s backlash from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The oil companies consummated the leases with the federal government back in the 1990s but have yet to do anything with them, officials said.

John Filostrat, supervisor of Public Affairs at the Department of Interior’s Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), said there are six active leases in the Apalachicola area closest to Panama City Beach.

"None is producing and none has plans to drill," he said in an email. "Furthermore, the companies would have to get a state review from Florida before BOEM could approve a plan to drill. The likelihood of that happening is nil since most of the Eastern Planning Area is under a Congressional moratoria until 2022. The military closes the area down most of the year for drills, so the clock does not run on the leases during that time."

If that wasn’t the case, the leases, which usually run seven to 10 years, would have already likely expired, he said in a telephone interview.

There are currently 84 leases with oil companies in the Eastern Planning Area off the coast of the Florida Panhandle, with 440,384 acres leased. However, none of the leased properties are being drilled for oil at this time.

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The federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management held a public meeting Feb. 24 on Panama City Beach to get public input about a proposal to offers leases for oil and natural gas drilling about 125 miles offshore.
from Panama City Beach. The handful of people who showed up expressed opposition to the drilling.

BOEM was discussing two areas for leases. One stretches from Louisiana to Alabama and to the Mexican border to the south; that area already includes 4,045 leases and several operating rigs. The other is a small sliver, less than 200 miles total, at the border of Alabama and Florida, 125 miles off the coast, parallel to Tampa in water that is about 1,200 feet deep. There are about 80 leases in this area, but no operating equipment.

Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network, a New Orleans-based environmental advocacy organization that works to help protect and restore the natural resources of the Gulf of Mexico, is opposed to the new leases being issued, saying a spill of the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon — even 125 miles off the coast — could be disastrous for Panama City Beach.

She also said she doubts the oil companies will end up drilling on the existing leased properties within 60 miles of Panama City Beach.

"Those were sold a long time ago before the moratorium," she said, referring to the federal government's ban on the issuance of new leases within 100 miles from the Florida coast. "I don't think there is a real significant chance anything would happen. It's more likely something will happen on leases between the Eastern and Central Gulf over near waters of Alabama."

Eric Draper, the executive director of Audubon Florida, said he wasn't aware of the active leases being as close as 25 miles from Panama City Beach.

He said Audubon Florida would be strongly opposed to drilling there.

"I will say I think most Floridians would say that no oil drilling in Florida waters, even within 125 miles, is acceptable, and that the Deepwater Horizon disaster demonstrated that oil spills could have a catastrophic effect on the environment that are harmful to the economy, and the risk of another spill doesn't justify whatever benefits there may be from additional drilling," Draper said.

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