



NOV 22 2006

James F. Bennett  
Branch of Environmental Assessment  
Minerals Management Service  
Department of the Interior  
381 Eldon Street  
Herndon, Virginia 20170

Re: Supplemental Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the  
Proposed Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program: 2007-2012

Dear Mr. Bennett:

On November 13, 2006, the Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration provided written comments to the Minerals Management Service regarding the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program: 2007-2012. We believe some of the comments and recommendations in that letter may be unclear in their intent and purpose. To clarify our intent we are providing the following supplemental comments.

In our General Comment 1, we recommended the FEIS clarify the purpose and need in greater detail by describing the benefits to states and the nation of developing Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) resources, and that the FEIS describe the screening process used to eliminate areas from consideration. We believe the activity of selecting the OCS planning areas which are to be proposed within the program DEIS should itself be subject to NEPA in that it is a major Federal action which presents significant environmental impacts. Because The U.S. Department of the Interior (USDOI) must manage its OCS program to ensure a proper balance among oil and gas production, environmental protection, and impacts to the coastal zone, a reasoned choice of alternatives which meet the purpose and need requires clarity on the trade-offs and justifications associated with including or excluding a particular OCS planning area from the 5-year schedule. Alternatives should be comprehensive, and allow selection from among many planning areas, rather than merely modifying, reducing, or eliminating one of the pre-selected areas. The DEIS should provide further explanation as to why planning areas under Congressional moratoria have been dropped from consideration, while the North Aleutian Basin (which is under a Presidential moratorium) is included.



The DEIS does not adequately support the decision not to include more, or all, OCS planning areas because (in part) of “continuing concerns from local communities about environmental issues analyzed previously”, as well as requests from governors of affected states. The DEIS also states many OCS planning areas have little or no resource potential or are of no interest to industry at this time. Yet, the Cook Inlet region is on the proposed 5-year schedule despite the fact that industry has shown little if any interest there. Additionally, because of their proximity to infrastructure, even areas with relatively small potential may be important in meeting national goals. We believe this contraction of potential lease sale areas unreasonably restricts the range of alternatives which may meet the stated objectives.

Our General Comment 2 identified Alternatives 2 and 5 (relative to the Chukchi Sea deferral only) as desirable alternatives, but the language in our letter may not have suggested that these alternatives are recommended by NOAA. NOAA does in fact recommend adoption of Alternative 2 and 5. We believe adoption of these alternatives would significantly improve the environmental consequences of the proposed leasing program, and are therefore strongly recommended.

Alternative 2: The proposed timing for the two sales scheduled in the north Aleutian Basin (2010 and 2012) would prevent adequate and necessary baseline environmental information to be obtained. The DEIS correctly identifies the many factors which support such a recommendation. These include the value of the North Aleutian Basin (NAB) to our Nation’s commercial fisheries and its wealth of marine mammals and other living marine resources. The large-scale changes within the Bering Sea ecosystem which have occurred also underscore the need for an updated and comprehensive environmental inventory and assessment of this region relative to the potential impacts associated with oil and gas leasing, exploration, and development.

Another argument supporting alternative 2 concerns the risk of oil spills. While most cetaceans have shown few if any effects from exposure to spilled oil, northern fur seals are extremely sensitive to spilled oil. Spilled oil from activities resulting from lease sales in the NAB represent the greatest population level threat to northern fur seals originating from the Pribilof and Bogoslof Islands. Lactating northern fur seals forage along the western portion of the NAB annually from July through October. Weaned northern fur seal pups spend part of November in western part of the NAB as well. Umimik Pass represents the most significant migratory corridor for northern fur seals during the spring and fall. The risk of spilled oil is understated, due not only to facility failure but also to associated vessel support. The NAB should not be included in any lease sales until an updated marine biological assessment is completed that incorporates recent foraging, migratory, and population data available as a result of recent advances in telemetry. In addition, oil spill modeling and risk assessments must be updated with more recent physical oceanography and marine mammal telemetry data in order to determine the nature, extent and potential for effects.

Alternative 5: This alternative includes the deferral of blocks within 25 miles of the Chukchi coast. We strongly endorse this alternative for several reasons:

\* This alternative would provide some degree of impact reduction for the endangered bowhead whale, as this population migrates through the nearshore lead system of the sea ice during its spring migration into the Beaufort Sea. The spring lead system is one of the most sensitive environments for these whales.

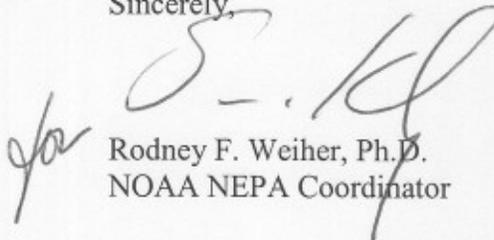
\*This alternative would afford some mitigation and avoidance for the Native villages along the Chukchi coast which depend on subsistence resources, especially marine mammals. The majority of subsistence harvest of marine mammals by these Chukchi coast villages occurs within 25 miles of shore.

\*This alternative would reduce the probability of seismic geophysical surveys occurring in the productive nearshore zone of the Chukchi Sea.

\*There appears to be little present interest by industry within the 25-mile zone.

We appreciate your consideration of the additional comments, outlined above, on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program: 2007-2012.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. F. Weiher', is written over the typed name. To the left of the signature, there is a small handwritten mark that looks like 'ja'.

Rodney F. Weiher, Ph.D.  
NOAA NEPA Coordinator