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CONTACT: Tom DeRocco
(202) 208-3985

Barney Congdon
(504) 736-2595

AREAS IDENTIFIED FOR 1997 LEASE SALES IN THE CENTRAL AND WESTERN GULF OF MEXICO

The Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service has identified the areas to be analyzed in an environmental impact statement (EIS) for proposed Sale 166 in the Central Gulf of Mexico and Sale 168 in the Western Gulf of Mexico. Both sales are scheduled to occur in 1997.

Sale 166 is the last Gulf of Mexico sale in the current (1992-1997) 5-Year Offshore Oil and Gas Leasing Program. Sale 168 is the first proposed Gulf of Mexico sale identified in the Draft Proposed Program for the next (1997-2002) 5-Year Program.

ACTION

The area to be studied in the EIS includes approximately 60 million acres of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) offshore Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama in the Central and Western Gulf of Mexico Planning Areas. Determination of the area to be studied came after consideration of information related to industry interest, resource potential, and possible environmental effects.

Unavailable for leasing consideration are two blocks in the Flower Garden National Marine Sanctuary, located in the Western Gulf Planning Area, Blocks A-375 and A-398 in High Island Area, East Addition, South Extension--East and West Flower Garden Banks, respectively. Also excluded from leasing consideration are the three shallow water blocks used by the U.S. Department of Navy in mine warfare training exercises. These blocks in the Western Gulf offshore Corpus Christi in the Mustang Island Area--Blocks 793, 799, 816--were excluded from the Call for Nominations, issued in June 1995.

Blocks included in the area identified for analysis range from 3 to 220 miles from shore, with water depths ranging from 4 to over 3,200 meters.

The Area Identification decision also identified stipulations to be included in the proposed actions. These lease stipulations would provide for:

- Protection of live bottom areas (Central Gulf only);
- Protection of topographic features; and,
- Reduction of possible use conflicts with military operations.

FUTURE ACTIONS REGARDING THE PROPOSED LEASE SALES

After a draft EIS is published in March 1996, public comments will be solicited.

Proposed Notices of Sale for each sale will be made available concurrently with the draft EIS, and comments on the size, timing, and location of the proposals will be requested from the governors of the affected States. The proposed Notices will identify the blocks proposed to be included in the sales, as well as proposed lease stipulations and other proposed terms and conditions of the sales.

After consideration of comments on the draft EIS and proposed Notices, a final EIS and consistency determinations (as to whether the proposed sales are consistent with the enforceable policies of Federally approved coastal zone management plans of affected States) will be prepared prior to any final decisions on the sales.

Sale 166, tentatively scheduled to be held in March 1997, will be the 54th OCS lease sale in the Central Gulf of Mexico. Sale 168, tentatively scheduled for August 1997, will be the 37th lease sale in the Western Gulf.

MMS is the federal agency that manages the nation's natural gas, oil and other mineral resources on the OCS, and collects, verifies and disburses about \$4 billion yearly in revenues from offshore federal mineral leases and from onshore mineral leases on federal and Indian lands.