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MMS Implements Multi-Year Process for OCS Sales in the Gulf of Mexico

In an innovative departure from usual practice, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) today issued a Call for Information and Nominations (Call) and Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for five proposed sales in the Central Gulf of Mexico. It marks the first time the agency has issued a multi-sale Call.

"MMS is modifying its prelease planning and decision process for proposed lease sales in the Central and Western Gulf of Mexico," said MMS Director Cynthia Quarterman. "This is another instance of using a common-sense approach to make government work smarter, better and more cost-effectively. We have over a dozen years experience in preparing for and holding annual lease sales in these two planning areas of the Gulf where the sale proposals in each case are very similar from year to year.

"While we're in the final stages of developing the 1997-2002 Five-Year Program," she explained, "the timing of proposed sales in 1998 makes it necessary to start the EIS process now."

Quarterman said the multi-sale process in the Central Gulf will incorporate planning and analysis for Sales 169, 172, 175, 178 and 182 tentatively scheduled for March of each year from 1998 through 2002. The multi-sale process in the Western Gulf will incorporate similar planning and analysis for Sales 171, 174, 177, and 180. A Call is expected to be issued later this year.

"I want to be absolutely clear," she declared. "Although we are proposing to prepare a single environmental impact statement (EIS) for all five central Gulf of Mexico sales in the proposed 1998-2002 period, we will not compromise our environmental standards or our commitment to amass the best and most comprehensive scientific data on which to base leasing decisions. Either an environmental assessment (EA) or supplemental EIS and a consistency determination will be prepared for each sale after the first sale."

According to Quarterman, the proposal, which has solid stakeholder support, will provide several benefits:

- it will focus the environmental process by making impact types and levels that change between sales more easily recognizable;
- new issues will be more easily highlighted for the decisionmakers and public;
- for sales after 1998, the process will allow for presale planning that spans only one year, rather than the current two-year process; and
- it will eliminate the repetitive issuance of a complete EIS for each sale, a practice that has resulted in "review burnout" in federal, state and local governments, and the public.

MMS is the federal agency that manages and regulates the Nation's natural gas, oil and other mineral resources on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), and collects, accounts for, and disburses about \$4 billion each year from offshore mineral leases and from onshore mineral leases on federal and Indian lands.

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