

**U.S. Department of the Interior
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NEWS RELEASE

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RELEASE:

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MMS IDENTIFIES ISSUES FOR PROPOSED LEASE SALES IN THE WESTERN GULF OF MEXICO

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) has identified the proposals, alternatives, and mitigating measures to be analyzed in an environmental impact statement (EIS) covering four proposed offshore oil and gas lease sales in the Western Gulf of Mexico. The multi-sale draft and final EIS will be prepared in lieu of a separate draft and final EIS for each of the four proposed sales. These proposed sales are included in the oil and gas leasing program for 1997-2002.

The area to be studied in the EIS will include all available unleased acreage in the Western Gulf of Mexico planning area. Unavailable for leasing consideration are two blocks in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (Blocks A-375 and A-398 in High Island Area, East Addition, South Extension). Also excluded from leasing consideration are three shallow water blocks offshore Corpus Christi used by the Navy in mine warfare training exercises (Mustang Island Area Blocks 793, 799, and 816). The four sales (Sales 171, 174, 177, and 180) are tentatively scheduled to be held annually in August beginning with Sale 171 in 1998.

On January 29, 1997, MMS issued a Call for Information and Nominations and Notice of Intent (Call/NOI) to Prepare an EIS for four proposed sales in the Western Gulf of Mexico. (This approach was first employed for five sales in the Central Gulf, starting with a multi-sale Call/NOI last August and a subsequent area identification announcement in December.)

The planning area contains about 25.7 million unleased acres offshore Texas and Louisiana. Blocks in the area identified for analysis range from 9 to 220 miles from shore in water depths from 8 to more than 3,000 meters. Included in the multi-sale EIS will be a stipulation for the protection of topographic features, a stipulation to reduce potential conflicts in military areas, and a stipulation limiting oil and gas operations on three additional blocks in the Naval Mine Warfare Training Area offshore Corpus Christi. Also identified for analysis as an alternative to the topographic features stipulation in the draft EIS is the deferral of blocks containing topographic features with sensitive biological resources.

After the first sale in 1998, MMS will prepare either an environmental assessment or a supplemental EIS for each sale that follows. A consistency determination and a proposed and final Notice of Sale will be prepared for every sale. The draft EIS is scheduled for publication in October 1997, after which, public comments will be solicited and a final EIS will be prepared.

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

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