

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Minerals Management Service
Office of Communications**

NEWS RELEASE

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**MMS IDENTIFIES ISSUES FOR PROPOSED
LEASE SALES IN THE CENTRAL 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 five proposed offshore oil and natural gas lease sales in the Central Gulf of Mexico. The multi-sale EIS will be prepared in lieu of a separate draft and final EIS for each of the proposed sales in the Central Gulf of Mexico; the five proposed sales are included in the recently approved 1997-2002 oil and natural gas leasing program.

On August 1, 1996, MMS issued a Call for Information and Nominations and Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS for five proposed sales in the Gulf of Mexico.* "This marks the first time we are implementing this innovation by using a multi-sale EIS," said MMS Director Cynthia Quarterman. "It's a common-sense approach to make government work smarter and more efficiently, while still maintaining our high environmental standards and our commitment to collecting top quality and comprehensive scientific data for environmental analysis."

The proposals in the EIS will include all available unleased acreage in the Central Gulf of Mexico planning area offshore Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The five sales (Sales 169, 172, 175, 178, and 182) are scheduled to be held annually beginning in March 1998.

The planning area contains about 30 million unleased acres. Blocks in the area identified for analysis range from three to 220 miles from shore, in water depths from four to over 3,200 meters. Included in the multi-sale EIS will be stipulations for the protection of topographic features, military areas, and live-bottom areas (the Pinnacle Trend) as part of the proposed actions. Also identified for analysis as alternatives to the proposals in the draft EIS, are the deferral of blocks containing topographic features with sensitive biological resources, and deferral of blocks south and within 15 miles of the Baldwin County, Alabama, coastline.

According to Quarterman, after the first sale, MMS will prepare either an environmental assessment or supplemental EIS and a consistency determination for each sale that follows. After a draft EIS is published in May 1997, public comments will be solicited and then a final EIS will be prepared.

MMS is the federal agency that manages the nation's natural gas, oil 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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