SURFRIDER FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA

Conservation
Activism
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Education

Protecting Waves and Beaches

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
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Canberra ACT 2600

Submission for Senate Inquiry: Impact of Seismic Testing on Fisheries and the Marine Environment

The Surfrider Foundation is opposed to seismic testing and offshore oil drilling in Australian waters. Our nation's oceans, waves and beaches are vital recreational, economic and ecological treasures that will be polluted by an expansion of seismic testing and offshore oil drilling. Instead of advocating for transient and environmentally harmful ways to meet Australia's oil needs, we should seek a comprehensive and environmentally sustainable energy plan that includes energy conservation. Seismic testing and exploration for offshore oil drilling have the potential to critically impact pristine marine ecosystems and lead to the industrialisation of our coastlines. While there are numerous environmental problems associated with seismic testing, there are also negative economic impacts that we simply cannot afford.

Ultimately, Australia cannot drill our way out of an oil consumption problem. We must look toward sustainable solutions that protect our natural resources, rather than drill for fossil fuels off our coasts. It is in the best interest of our environment and economy to develop a sustainable "energy portfolio" that includes renewable sources and conservation.

It's imperative that our nation's leaders shift away from the old mindset of relying on fossil fuels. Climate change will not wait for us to 'rebuild our energy portfolio'. Seismic testing, oil drilling and the continued use of fossil fuels only exacerbate the impacts of climate change, and keep us trapped in a backwards frame of mind. The answers for sustainable energy are already in front of us—and offshore drilling is not part of the answer.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

- Oil Exploration—Seismic Surveys

In order to conduct seismic surveys, ships use 'airgun arrays' to emit high-decibel explosive impulses to map the seafloor. The noise from seismic surveys has been proven to damage and/or kill marine life. High decibels are known to kill plankton 1km away, and temporarily if not permanently deafen whales and dolphins, hindering communication and navigation and stopping the whale song. Seismic testing is linked to the malformation and death of scallops, lobsters, turtles and the stranding of whales and dolphins[1]. These disturbances can also disrupt important migratory patterns, forcing marine life away from suitable habitats meant for foraging and mating.

- Drilling and Processing Oil

The process of drilling releases thousands of gallons of polluted water, known as "drilling muds". These muds contain toxic substances like benzene, zinc, arsenic, radioactive materials, and other contaminants used to lubricate drill bits and maintain pressure. Unfortunately, discharges are unregulated[2]. High concentrations of metals have been found around drilling platforms in the Gulf of Mexico[3].

Air pollution is yet another major problem associated with drilling and processing. Over its operational lifespan, a single rig can pollute the equivalent of 7,000 cars driving 50 miles per day[4]. Additionally, the drilling and construction of oil pipelines used to transport extracted oil back to shore disturb fragile seafloor habitats, wetlands, and beaches.

- Oil Spills

As demonstrated by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, oil spills have the potential to damage entire ecosystems. BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill released approximately 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, fouling beaches and coastal wetlands; killing birds, fish, and marine mammals; and devastating the recreation and fishing-based coastal economies of the Gulf States. Oil spills also take many years to clean up. Nearly 20 years after the Exxon Valdez spill, more than 26,000 gallons of oil still remain in shoreline soils[5].

- Onshore Environmental Impacts

Oil production requires massive onshore infrastructure for transportation, storage, processing, and delivery. As such, local communities can experience onshore environmental problems because of offshore drilling. To transport oil to processing plants, pipelines and roads are often built through coastal wetlands and beaches, causing severe rates in the loss of habitat functionalities. As such, the oil industry externalises the costs of air,

[1] https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-07-26/rock-lobsters-impacted-by-seismic-surveys/11343240
[2] Patin, S. (Translations by Cascio, E.) 1999. "Waste discharges during the offshore oil and gas activity".
[3] MMS. 2001. "Gulf of Mexico OCS Oil and Gas Lease Sale 181", Final Environmental Impact Statement. https://www.boem.gov/BOEM-Newsroom/Library/Publications/2008/2008-011.aspx
[4] "Dirty Business" USPIRG http://uspirg.org/uspirg.asp?id2=24551
[5] MacAskill, E. 2007. "18 years on, Exxon Valdez oil still pours" The Guardian.

water and land pollution at the expense of our environment and coastal economies.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Our multi-million dollar tourist industry is deeply threatened by seismic testing and drilling for oil. New South Wales are world renowned for whale and dolphin watching. All the more, the whole industry related to the ocean and beaches is at stake if we chose to run seismic testing in our coastlines.
In addition to impacting tourism and recreation, drilling disrupts fishing industries. Seismic surveys, rig construction, spill risk, and decommissioning activities displace fishermen, and will destroy tuna industry[6]. Australian Rock lobster population will be affected as seismic testing damages their ability to fend off predators, jeopardising the commercial viability of the Australian fishing industries.

In the end, drilling for oil doesn't create jobs. The offshore oil and gas industry would risk more coastal and ocean jobs than it would provide. Offshore oil and gas development will harm industries that depend on a healthy coast and ocean and provide more jobs and income to local economies. 2/3 of Australian Gas is exported; with this project, we are risking our coast and marine animals for gas that we do not need.

CONCLUSION

Public opinion polls demonstrate that the majority of Australians oppose drilling activities and seismic testing. Off-shore drilling activities are a risky business, putting profits to international entities above local jobs, tourism, health and environment. It provokes a loss of local control. Australians consider the coastline as our recreational playground, and the health and well-being component of our nation has a greater value, than any short term fossil fuel gains. In actions around Australia on November 23rd 2019, over 10,000 Australians took to the water to oppose oil drilling and seismic related activities in over 50 locations around Australia. This is something that the people of Australia feel passionate about, and we will protect our coastlines and beaches.

Australia must look toward sustainable energy solutions that protect our natural resources, rather than risk the future of our coastal playgrounds, marine ecosystems, tourism, fishing and economies. Each of us can reduce our energy usage and reliance on fossil fuels by increasing the energy efficiency of our home, workspace and travel; not buying oil-derived products (plastics); and advocating for sustainable policies and energy portfolios that prioritise renewable sources, research and development, for energy storage.

Yours Sincerely,

Susie Crick - Chair
Surfrider Foundation Australia

[6] https://atuna.com/pages/australian-seismic-testing-will-destroy-tuna-industry