



Department of Health

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March 7, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Re: 2019-2024 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing – Draft Proposed Program

Dear Secretary Zinke:

I write to express my strong opposition to offshore drilling and specifically to the proposed inclusion of the North Atlantic Region in the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2019-2024.

The proposed oil and gas drilling threatens the State of Rhode Island's fundamental cultural, environmental, and economic interests. In particular, as the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, I raise objections related to the impact of oil and gas exploration and extraction on the human environment.

The proposed leasing program would expand investment in infrastructure for oil and gas; fossil fuels which, when combusted, produce greenhouse gases. While it is difficult to measure the impact of individual projects, the climate change implications of fossil fuel burning have dramatic local and global effects on public health. Due to climate change, mental health, physical health, infrastructure, and the safety of our food and water will all be impacted by more frequent heat waves, storms, droughts, floods, and sea-level rise.

RIDOH's *2015 Climate Change and Health Resiliency Report*¹ provides a comprehensive review of projected health impacts in Rhode Island due to climate change. The following examples are taken from that report:

¹ *2015 Climate Change and Health Resiliency Report* (2015). RI Department of Health. Available at: <http://health.ri.gov/publications/reports/ClimateChangeAndHealthResiliency.pdf>.



- Climate change will cause an increase in both frequency and scale of heat waves and high-heat days, resulting in an increase in heat-related illness and death. The impacts of rising temperatures are compounded in urban areas due to the “heat island effect.” Older adults and children are especially vulnerable to these effects, as are those who have underlying medical conditions or limited access to resources which would allow them to minimize their exposure and to obtain appropriate care.
- Increased temperatures are likely to magnify the health impacts caused by air pollution, particularly pollutants like ozone, fine particles, and formaldehyde, which are formed in the atmosphere in the presence of heat and sunlight. Exposure to these pollutants increases the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular effects. Older adults, children, people with underlying respiratory and cardiac issues, people who work or recreate outdoors, and people who have limited access to resources that enable them to minimize exposures and obtain appropriate care are particularly vulnerable.
- Climate change increases the intensity of storms and rainfall events. Floods are the most frequent natural disaster in the United States. Causes of flood-related mortality include drowning, hypothermia, trauma, and a combination of these. The health effects of natural disasters also extend beyond the immediate injuries and trauma of a disaster, affecting communities long after the event with issues related to mental health and population displacement.

Healthy oceans also are critical to our state’s coastal communities, whose economies rely on tourism and fishing. Opening new areas to offshore drilling risks permanent damage to our oceans and beaches without reducing our dependence on oil. When oil spills occur, they can bring catastrophic harm to marine life and devastating losses to local businesses. Even routine exploration and drilling activities bring harm to many marine species.

Oil spills represent a significant risk to the Rhode Island economy. Our small state, with a population of just over a million, hosts 20 million beach visits per year and beaches poll as our most valued recreational facilities. We have more than 12 million annual visitors to our coasts, fueling the 4th largest economic sector in the state.

Our own experience in 1989 with the World Prodigy oil tanker spill demonstrated the risks. While the World Prodigy event was a relatively small spill, beach and shellfish bed closures and wildlife losses were devastating at local scales. Significant oil concentrations in beach sand persisted for at least five years, and potential health risks could not be fully evaluated. Offshore drilling inarguably increases the probability of spill events.

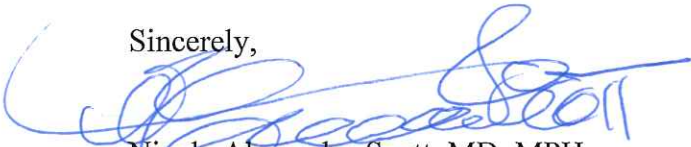
There are incredible renewable energy resources off our coast - wind and tidal energy that can power our economy, create good paying jobs and reduce greenhouse gas pollution. Rhode Island



is proud to be home to the nation's first offshore wind farm. I support our state's commitment to a renewable energy future, not expansion of fossil fuels, due to the negative effects fossil fuels have on the environment, the economy, and the public's health.

Thank you for your attention to this correspondence.

Sincerely,



Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH
Director
Rhode Island Department of Health



State of Rhode Island