

On the Anniversary of Deepwater Horizon, there has Never Been a Better Time to Ditch Offshore Drilling

By Claudia Steiner and Isabella Jaramillo

On April 20, 2010, I woke up on a cruise ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Instead of the sounds of sea waves hitting the ship, I was startled awake by the voice of a panic-stricken news anchor on the TV. Just a few hundred miles away, oil giant BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig had spilled over [130 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico](#). Eleven on-site employees and thousands of marine plants and animals were killed. More than [1,500 miles along the shoreline](#), spanning five states, and [47,000 square miles of ocean surface water](#) were contaminated. It was at that moment that I began to understand the consequences of drilling for oil in the ocean.

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill is notorious for the damage it caused to the marine environment and prosperity of coastal communities along the Gulf. And yet, it is far from the only time an oil corporation's flagrant disregard for the environment has resulted in disaster. In the 13 years since Deepwater Horizon, [over 5,000 oil spills have been reported in the United States](#). That means hundreds of millions more gallons of oil and metric tons of greenhouse gases have been released into the oceans and atmosphere, respectively. The havoc offshore drilling has wreaked on the environment and climate cannot go on.

Oil companies continue to discharge [over 60 million gallons of oil a year](#) into our oceans and onto our shorelines – but they are not acting alone. For every catastrophic drilling exploration led by Big Oil on U.S. waters, the U.S. government has been there to provide authorization.

The Department of Interior's (DOI) Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) is responsible for overseeing the National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program. The Bureau creates a schedule over a five-year period for the leasing of oil and gas sales on U.S. federal waters. After rounds of public comments, environmental impact statements, and a final decision from the Secretary of the Interior, a program for oil and gas exploration on the Outer Continental Shelf is determined. BOEM then auctions the federal waters included in the program to oil bidders for drilling.

This past month, BOEM auctioned over 76 million acres [in the Gulf of Mexico](#) to the oil industry as a requirement of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. This lease sale, originally part of the 2017-2022 five-year plan, had previously been canceled because of environmental concerns that arose from initial environmental impact statements. Nevertheless, moderate Democrats in the pocket of Big Oil fought for the inclusion of the lease sales before allowing the otherwise landmark climate bill to pass. Oil companies were able to secure 1.6 million acres for dirty energy development through complicated infrastructure projects whose output and spillage will be borne by Gulf communities and the climate for decades to come.

The authorization of offshore oil drilling projects in U.S. waters flies in the face of the [IPCC's Sixth Assessment-Report's](#) warning that a failure to implement “immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors” will almost certainly result in the global temperature passing the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold between 2030 and 2035. President Biden and Interior Secretary Haaland must leverage every tool at their disposal to marshal a renewable energy revolution and end Big Oil's outmoded pursuits to exploit fossil fuels for energy. They must remember the carnage wrought by Deepwater Horizon and recognize that it was not an anomaly,

but an inevitability. The time for wishful thinking when it comes to the oil industry is long gone: it is time to sanction [no new leases](#) in the upcoming five-year plan.

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