

Tract list available for proposed offshore oil/gas sale in Bering Sea

A list of 299 tracts totaling about 1,682,389 acres (680,853 hectares) in the southeastern Bering Sea offshore Alaska has been tentatively selected for intensive environmental study as the subject of a draft environmental impact statement.

The area is proposed for an outer continental shelf oil and gas lease sale (OCS No. 45) tentatively scheduled early in 1977, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management announced recently.

The list of tracts is available from the Manager, Bureau of Land Management, Alaska OCS Office, P.O. Box 1159, Anchorage, Alaska 99510, or the Bureau of Land Management (720), Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

BLM issued its call for nominations and comment on the southeastern Bering Sea OCS area on Dec. 17, 1974, for an area totaling 3,619 tracts covering 20.6 million acres (8.3 million hectares).

The tentative selection of 1.7 million acres was made from an area totaling 16.5 million acres (6.7 million hectares) which was nominated by the petroleum industry for consideration if a lease sale ultimately were held.

Selection of the 1.7 million acres was based in part on opinions of various concerned federal agencies regarding the extremely sensitive and unique ecological habitat of Bering Sea offshore waters, BLM said.

Major U.S. and international commercial fisheries exist in this area, as do subsistence fisheries for the Alaskan Natives. In addition, the St. George Basin, a subsea geologic area of that part of the Bering Sea under study, encompasses migratory routes and breeding and feeding grounds for many fish, mammal and bird populations.

The St. George Basin is a prominent declivity (or downward sloping) in the broad, shallow shelf of this area of the Bering Sea regarded by scientists as being among the most biologically productive waters in the world.

The tentative selection area touches on migratory routes and/or feeding or fishing grounds to some degree, but many environmentally critical regions have been eliminated from considerations for leasing.

For example, not selected for ultimate lease sale consideration was approximately 1.8 million acres in an area of upwelling which brings to the surface nutrient-rich waters crucial to the biologic health of the entire Bering Sea area and to many north Pacific Ocean species.

A multi-disciplinary team of scientists and other environmental specialists based in the bureau's Alaska OCS Office in Anchorage will begin preparing the draft environmental impact statement.

In order to obtain the maximum public input in the preparation of this statement, BLM will invite federal agencies, state and local governments, and a wide variety of professional groups and private organizations to participate through in-depth consultation and coordination.

The impact statement will reflect early findings of an on-going intensive assessment or baseline study of the environment in this key Alaskan OCS area.

The proposed planning schedule released in June 1975 shows the lease sale for the Bering Sea tentatively scheduled for March 1977. The Alaskan OCS sales in this schedule are currently under review in an effort to find ways to better harmonize the needs of Alaska and the energy needs of the nation. The State of Alaska has been asked to participate in this review.

All of the tracts are between 35 and 125 miles offshore in sub-arctic waters from 345 to 460 feet deep (105 to 140 meters). This area lies generally on a northwest-southwest line between the Pribilof Islands and the eastern end of the Aleutian Island chain.

The decision to target specific tracts for environmental study and write an impact statement which weighs potential impacts and considers alternatives does not mean that these tracts will actually be offered in an OCS lease sale, BLM emphasized. It only means that the target area for an impact statement has been specifically pinpointed for study.

After publication of a draft impact statement, public hearings will be held, and the recorded testimony reflected in a final statement published several months after the hearings.

Thirty days after the final statement is submitted to the President's Council on Environmental Quality, the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to determine if a sale shall be held.

If a sale decision is made, the secretary may also decide to offer less acreage than originally planned, and may determine what lease requirement should be written into the terms of a leasing agreement to protect the environment.

If a decision is made to hold a sale, the sale normally follows in 30 days.

These orderly and sequential steps in the process of a proposed lease sale are defined by the OCS Lands Act, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), guidelines

issued by the President's Council (CEQ), and departmental on Environmental Quality regulations.

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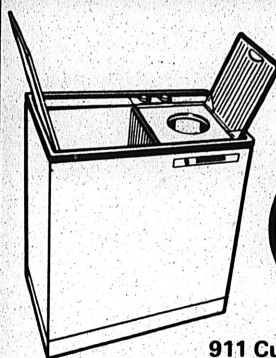
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