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Friends of the Sea Otter

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The Scope and Danger of Californian Offshore Oil Drills



In light of the pending success of capping the 3 month-long oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, it is a good idea to look at California's offshore oil production. Though not necessarily known for its petroleum resources, California has sizeable offshore oil production. Thirty-two offshore oil extraction sites dot the Californian coast, most of which can be seen from the shore, and produce over 100,000 barrels of oil a day. In 2008, offshore oil wells produced 16% of the oil demanded by California.¹

The rules regarding offshore oil production are slightly complicated. Because California only technically owns waters up to 3 nautical miles from the shore while the federal government owns the rest, both Sacramento and Washington DC have the ability to sell leases to oil wells.

The state government has had a moratorium on new offshore leases since the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969. A similar explosion of natural gas like the one that happened on the Deepwater Horizon drill spilled 200,000 gallons a day for more than a week. Over 750 square miles of Californian coastal water was affected by the spill, and 35 miles of coastline and beach from Rincorn Point to Goleta saw thick tar-like oil coat its shores.

Though there were reports of oil as far north as Santa Rosa, the oil slick of the Santa Barbara oil spill would not have been in the current range of the Southern Sea Otter. An accident the size of the Deepwater Horizon spill would, however, have a devastating impact on the S. Sea Otters of the Californian coast. An interesting website called <http://www.ifitwasmymyhome.com/> can bring home the sheer monstrosity that is the Gulf oil spill by imposing the damaged area over any location. This simple visual shows that a spill that size could have the potential to cover the entire range of the Southern Sea Otter, which could wipe the species out.

Though oil is damaging to all sea life, Sea Otters are especially susceptible to the effects of an oil accident as they rely exclusively on their specialized fur for warmth instead of blubber. When in contact with oil, Sea Otter fur loses much of its ability to trap heat and thus exposes the animal to the cold seawater.

Up until 1984 the federal government had continued to lease rights to wells under its jurisdiction. A moratorium on drilling in federal waters since then has been renewed every year until 2008 when Congress did not continue it. An effective lawsuit filed by California had kept any new leases from being issued until the Obama administration came to power. The Obama administration has ruled out any policy of offshore drilling in California, but this policy is susceptible to changes and repeal by future administrations.

In order to make the Obama policy more permanent and thus harder for future administrations to change, a cadre of Californian congressmen has introduced H.R. 5213: The West Coast Ocean Protection Act of 2010.² The bill would effectively ban offshore drilling on California's outer continental shelf, which is where the federal government owns its wells.

Though domestic oil production might play a role in securing America's oil independence in the future, the danger it poses to a fragile ecosystem like the California coast is simply too high.

1. [California Department of Conservation: *Monthly oil and gas production and injection report, November 2008*](#), PDF file, downloaded 31 July 2010.

2. Keep track of the West Coast Ocean Protection Act of 2010 on govtrack.us here: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-5213>.