

3.21.11 NEW ORLEANS – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) Director Michael R. Bromwich today announced that the bureau has approved an Exploration Plan, submitted by Shell Offshore Inc., following the completion of a site-specific Environmental Assessment (SEA) for deepwater oil and gas exploration.

This is the first new deepwater exploration plan approved since the Deepwater Horizon explosion and resulting oil spill. An exploration plan describes all exploration activities planned by the operator for a specific lease or leases, including the timing of these activities, information concerning drilling vessels, the location of each planned well, and other relevant information that needs to meet important safety standards. Once a plan is approved, additional new applications for permits to drill can be issued.

“The reforms we have implemented have set a strong new standard for safety and environmental protection for offshore operations,” said Secretary Salazar. “This exploration plan meets the new standards for environmental review and marks another important step toward safer deepwater exploration.”

“The successful completion of this environmental assessment, and the resulting approval of Shell’s exploration plan, unmistakably demonstrates that oil and gas exploration can continue responsibly in deep water,” said BOEMRE Director Bromwich. “Shell’s submission has satisfied the heightened environmental standards that we are now applying and I am confident that other operators can satisfy the same standards.”

The plan is a supplemental exploration plan that proposes activities that were not included in an original exploration plan for the same lease – located in Shell’s Auger field – which was approved in 1985. This supplements the original plan by proposing to drill three exploratory wells in approximately 2,950 feet water depth, 130 miles offshore Louisiana.

BOEMRE prepared the SEA to examine Shell’s proposed exploration activities in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the implementation of departmental and bureau regulations.

The SEA included new scientific information that had not been previously available for consideration or analysis. Based on its review, BOEMRE found no evidence that the proposed action would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, BOEMRE determined that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was not required and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), which allowed the supplemental exploration plan to be approved.

In August 2010, Secretary Salazar and Director Bromwich announced that the bureau would prepare environmental assessments, rather than rely upon categorical exclusions, before approving new exploration or development plans for deepwater drilling projects while it undertook a comprehensive review of its NEPA process. That comprehensive review continues. For more information, go to: <http://on.doi.gov/cCPgkm>.

Today’s announcement is one in a series of important milestones over the past several months in the return to safe drilling in deep water. While Shell’s Exploration Plan will lead to the drilling of new wells in the Gulf of Mexico, BOEMRE has already approved a number of permits to resume activity in shallow and deep water. A list of well types, pending and approved permits, and information on new safety regulations, is at: http://www.gomr.boemre.gov/homepg/offshore/safety/well_permits.html