



August 11, 2011

By E-Filing

Maureen Bornholdt
Program Director
Office of Offshore Alternative Energy Programs (MS 4090)
Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement
381 Elden Street
Herndon, Virginia, 20170

Re: Draft Environmental Assessment for Commercial Wind Lease Issuance and Site Characterization Activities on the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf Offshore New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. (BOEM 2011-0053)

Dear Ms. Bornholdt:

National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and Virginia Conservation Network (VCN) strongly support the development of offshore wind energy in a manner that is protective of our coastal and marine resources. Our organizations represent the power and commitment of millions of members and supporters across the country and we have long history of working together to conserve wildlife and wild places. To that end, we are pleased to submit these comments to you today regarding the Draft Environmental Assessment for Commercial Wind Lease Issuance and Site Characterization Activities on the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf Offshore New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia (hereafter "Draft EA").

America can no longer afford to ignore the massive clean energy opportunity in the Atlantic Ocean, and we appreciate the recent efforts by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE) to develop an effective and efficient process to finally bring this energy ashore. Our overdependence on fossil fuels has placed current and future generations of people and wildlife in grave danger, and we must take aggressive steps to transition to clean, efficient renewable energy sources. Advancing new sources of large-scale renewable energy such as offshore wind will create good-paying jobs and move our nation toward energy independence while reducing the harmful pollution resulting from fossil fuel energy generation.

The Mid-Atlantic region holds great promise for offshore wind energy generation with high wind speeds and shallow waters extending many miles offshore. Our organizations support the Obama Administration's "Smart from the Start" initiative, which seeks to expedite the development of first generation offshore wind projects in the Atlantic through multi-agency collaboration, while ensuring

that projects are carefully and appropriately sited. Specifically, we believe that BOEMRE's efforts to identify and prioritize areas of least conflict for quicker permitting are essential as this will greatly help ensure efficient use of both developer and government dollars in these early stages of developing an offshore wind industry in America.

Our organizations believe that offshore wind development can and must occur while protecting the Atlantic Ocean as a priceless and connected ecosystem. We offer these comments on the Draft EA to ensure that our coastal and marine resources are protected during this important site assessment and characterization phase of the process. NWF and VCN are largely supportive of BOEMRE's preferred Alternative A, as we believe it is critically important to begin the more detailed research of these areas necessary to develop comprehensive construction and operation plans for future offshore wind facilities that will be sufficiently protective of our marine and coastal resources. However, we are concerned that the Draft EA does not adequately address some key issues and encourage BOEMRE take our comments into consideration when preparing the Final EA. Specifically, we offer comments regarding the North American Right Whale Alternative D, the removal of potential lease blocks in Alternatives C and E, and the process for developing the lease instrument authorizing site characterization and assessment activities.

I. North American Right Whale Protections

While we support much of the preferred Alternative A, we do not believe it is sufficient to fully protect the endangered North Atlantic Right Whales from adverse impacts resulting from the site assessment and characterization activities likely to occur in these areas. We recommend the inclusion of strong protective measures – like those suggested in Appendix C and Alternative D – to first avoid, then mitigate impacts to the Right Whale.

We believe that strong, formal consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is needed to ensure that the most effective measures are required to protect this critically endangered species throughout the year. We do not support the blanket exclusion of Alternative D, as we do not think it is either sufficiently protective of the whales or workable for the industry.

It is critical that the final EA require stringent measures at all times to protect whales from ship strikes and adverse impacts from undersea noise resulting from sonar and pile-driving activities. Examples include ship speed restrictions (10 knots or less), sound-masking measures such as bubble curtains, and periodic halts on certain operations at key times throughout the year or when endangered species come into the area. The Final EA must include detailed explanations of the required protective measures and their likely effectiveness, as this is lacking in Appendix C and Alternative D in the Draft EA. Further, if some type of blanket exclusion of site assessment and characterization activities is determined to be necessary during the winter months, we strongly encourage BOEMRE to allow biological data surveys to occur during this time as it is critical that we collect as much data as possible during this time to help inform construction and operations planning.

II. Removal of Lease Blocks in Alternatives C and E

NWF and VCN would like to see the maximum build-out of appropriately-sited offshore wind possible off the Atlantic Coast. At the same time, we are fully supportive of BOEMRE's efforts to identify areas of least conflict in order to facilitate a quicker, more efficient permitting process to get the first generation

of offshore wind turbines spinning off our shores in the near term. While we support Alternative A, we would prefer to not see the potential lease areas reduced any further as proposed in Alternatives C and E for Maryland and Virginia. Part of ensuring that the best sites for both wildlife and wind generation are identified for offshore wind development involves having a wide area to choose from, and removing too many areas from consideration so early in the process severely limits our options. Further, we believe that any areas removed in the Final EA - from either preferred Alternative or Alternatives C and E – should not be permanently off the table. We support moving forward the areas identified, but encourage BOEMRE to gather more information and take a closer look at all areas removed at this stage and consider them for future site assessment and characterization leasing.

III. Lease Instrument for Site Assessment and Characterization Activities

As we recommended in our scoping comments on the Mid-Atlantic Wind Energy Areas in March, it is essential that BOEMRE create a lease instrument for site assessment and characterization activities that is sufficiently conditioned to ensure protection of our marine and coastal resources while providing developers with the certainty they need when investing substantial dollars in data collection in these areas. While each lease will undoubtedly contain site specific details and requirements, we believe that the base language that is used for all leases should be made available for public comment prior to issuance. It is especially critical that the specific wildlife avoidance and mitigation measures recommended by NMFS and NOAA are fully incorporated into the lease language.

In conclusion, NWF and VCN appreciate the opportunity to comment on this Draft EA and look forward to working with BOEMRE in the months and years ahead to realize maximum build-out of our offshore wind energy resources while protecting our treasured wildlife in the Atlantic Ocean.

Sincerely,

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