

## Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill: Briefing for Second Reading

### Safeguarding Marine Protected Areas

#### Summary:

- The Offshore Petroleum Licensing (OPL) Bill will require the North Sea Transition Authority (NSTA) to run annual oil and gas licensing rounds in the UK. This new duty will include decisions on which geographical blocks of the sea become available for oil and gas search and production.
- At the same time, the Government has committed under the Global Biodiversity Framework to protect at least 30% of UK waters for nature by 2030 (30x30). This includes a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) which have been specifically designated to provide refuge for the marine environment from the impacts of development, pollution and overfishing.
- In its current form, the OPL Bill has no provisions in place to prevent the NSTA from offering up and licensing offshore oil and gas exploration and production within or under Marine Protected Areas.
- As a result, with increased oil and gas exploration and production, these important sites for wildlife protection will be exposed to new damage and further habitat loss. This is contrary to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) advice that industrial activities and infrastructure developments are not compatible with MPAs.<sup>1</sup>
- Any new oil and gas licensing undermines the objectives of the Paris Agreement, extending dependence on fossil fuels, without benefit for domestic energy prices or energy security. Despite the Climate Change Committee concluding that the oil and gas industry is not on track to meet its emission reduction targets, the ‘safeguards’ proposed in the OPL Bill 1(1) appear to be weaker than all previous “energy checkpoint” provisions.
- **The OPL Bill should be amended to prevent the NSTA from inviting oil and gas search and production applications in any geographical block within or under a Marine Protected Area.**

#### Why should the Government prevent damaging activities in MPAs?

Marine Protected Areas are designed to safeguard some of the most vulnerable marine habitats and species from irreversible damage. Generally, the areas they cover have been chosen for the protection of a specific feature such as harbour porpoise or endangered cold-water reefs.

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<sup>1</sup> [Marine protected areas and climate change - resource | IUCN](#)

At present, only 8% of English MPAs offer effective protection for nature and 56% of features within them have been assessed as being in an unfavourable condition.<sup>2</sup> The Government has committed to a legally binding target to decrease this number to 30% by 2042.<sup>3</sup> More widely, UK seas are failing to meet 11 out of 15 targets for Good Environmental Status at sea. None of these targets will be reached without significant strengthening of MPA protections.

Oil and gas search and production can inflict serious harm on the marine environment with some of the most damaging effects outlined in Uplift and Oceana's 'In Deep Water' Report.<sup>4</sup>

- Oil spills, large or small, can occur throughout the search and extraction process causing harm to individual creatures across populations of marine wildlife and can disrupt whole ecosystems.
- Polluting underwater noise from 'seismic airgun' surveys undertaken almost exclusively for oil and gas search which cause severe harm to protected marine mammals, commercially important fish species and invertebrates.
- Direct destruction of habitats such as deep sea sponge communities and cold water corals which are essential for performing nutrient cycles, vital to keeping the oceans clean.

By allowing the NSTA to issue oil and gas search and extraction licenses in blocks within MPAs, the Government is undermining their very purpose and taking the UK even further away from achieving 30x30 at sea.

An effective MPA network will ensure UK seas perform their vital functions in the fight against climate change and boost the biodiversity essential for a functioning and sustainable fishing industry. It will improve the resilience of marine species to changing conditions and continue to support the recreational activities essential to so many people's well-being across the UK. All of these benefits would be jeopardised by allowing oil and gas drilling within MPAs.

**The Bill should be amended to ensure that Marine Protected Areas are completely off the table when oil and gas search and production blocks are considered.**

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*[Wildlife and Countryside Link](#) (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 82 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.*

*For questions or further information please contact:*

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL\\_2023\\_Progress\\_Report\\_on\\_30x30\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_2023_Progress_Report_on_30x30_in_England.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-01-24/debates/BE258E23-1CA7-4607-804B-FD42A0EC3DEE/EnvironmentalTargets\(MarineProtectedAreas\)Regulations2022](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-01-24/debates/BE258E23-1CA7-4607-804B-FD42A0EC3DEE/EnvironmentalTargets(MarineProtectedAreas)Regulations2022)

<sup>4</sup> [InDeepWater-Report-Edited-LowRes.pdf](#) (oceana.org)