

## **New Offshore Oil and Gas Production will harm the Marine Environment**

*September 2022*

### **Summary:**

- The Government has proposed as many as 130 new licences for oil and gas exploration in the North Sea.
- The UK's seas are already in a poor environmental state, failing on 11 of 15 key indicators<sup>1</sup> and very few Marine Protected Areas are achieving their conservation targets.<sup>2</sup>
- The North Sea is already one of the busiest maritime areas in the world. The Government is committed to managing 30% of our seas for nature by 2030, alongside existing targets for offshore wind and commitments to fisheries.
- New oil and gas exploration is incompatible with climate change goals, threatening marine life from warming seas. It is also a direct threat to the marine environment through the impact of noise, oil spills, and toxic pollutants.
- To protect both climate and nature, no new exploration licences should be issued.

### **Government proposals:**

- The new Prime Minister has promised to accelerate “all sources of domestic energy, including North Sea oil and gas production.” It is reported that up to 130 new North Sea oil and gas exploration licences could be issued.<sup>3</sup>
- On 23 September BEIS announced a new oil and gas licensing round, expected to be launched by the North Sea Transition Authority (NSTA) in early October.<sup>4</sup>

### **How the marine environment is harmed from offshore drilling:**

- **Climate change.** Offshore drilling has a direct impact on climate change by increasing our reliance on fossil fuels. Climate change is causing dangerous effects for marine life including sea-level rises, marine heatwaves, changes to food webs and ocean acidification.
- **Noise from oil and gas activities.** There are a number of distinct phases of oil and gas activities, from initial exploration to drilling and production through to decommissioning; all of which produce noise which can harm marine life such as whales. The Government has previously outlined noisy activities as including high

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.edie.net/spectacular-failure-green-groups-respond-to-governments-marine-strategy/>

<sup>2</sup> This is based on the condition of the protected features at the time of initial vulnerability assessments or initial site condition monitoring <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bright-Blue-Seas-Greenpeacereport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-uk-announce-dozens-new-north-sea-oil-gas-licences-sources-2022-09-07/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-takes-next-steps-to-boost-domestic-energy-production>

powered sparker systems, high powered boomers, pile driving activities and the use of explosives.<sup>5</sup>

- **Survey noise.** Seismic air guns which are used to survey the seabed are a particularly acute cause of noise. These air guns are towed behind survey ships and rapidly release compressed air every 10-15 seconds into the ocean, producing a loud bang. Research has found that this is loud enough to affect whales up to 3km away, potentially affecting their migration patterns, feeding, and socialising.<sup>6</sup>
- **Toxic Pollution:** Offshore drilling operations release toxic pollution into the air and water. Exploration and drilling at the platform, transportation using tankers, and refining oil on land can all release volatile organic compounds, greenhouse gases, and other air pollutants.<sup>7</sup>
- **Oil Spills:** Although oil spills are rare in the North Sea, oil of any amount can have a devastating impact on marine life. 94 unplanned hydrocarbon releases occurred on North Sea oil and gas facilities in 2020 and 128 in 2019 according to the Health & Safety Executive.<sup>8</sup> Recent UK incidents include a pipeline leak in Wales in February.<sup>9</sup>

### The marine environment is already in a poor condition:

- The UK Marine Strategy is the framework designed to monitor and manage human activity in UK waters, but the goal of achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) by 2020 was missed, failing on 11 out of 15 targets.<sup>10</sup>
- Between 1986 and 2019, the number of the UK's globally important breeding seabirds fell by almost a quarter and by nearly half in Scotland.<sup>11</sup> The bird flu outbreak this year has killed thousands of seabirds, devastating UK colonies.<sup>12</sup>
- The North Sea is one of the busiest maritime areas in the world, even before recent proposals for increased oil and gas development.<sup>13</sup> It is in these already busy seas that we also need to accelerate offshore wind at an unprecedented rate.
- With some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world off the UK's coast, underwater noise has been increasing over the last 30 years.<sup>14</sup> Research has found that underwater noise increases stress that negatively affects the welfare of individual animals and entire populations, masks sounds that are critical for the survival of marine life (such as communication essential for breeding and feeding), can disorient

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<sup>5</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/851545/Review\\_and\\_Assessment\\_of\\_underwater\\_sound\\_produced\\_from\\_oil\\_and\\_gas\\_sound\\_activities.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/851545/Review_and_Assessment_of_underwater_sound_produced_from_oil_and_gas_sound_activities.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><https://theconversation.com/noise-from-offshore-oil-and-gas-surveys-can-affect-whales-up-to-3km-away-82646>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.cbf.org/issues/offshore-drilling/index.html>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.hse.gov.uk/offshore/statistics/hsr2020.pdf>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.offshore-energy.biz/hundreds-of-barrels-of-oil-spill-into-sea-off-uk/>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.edie.net/spectacular-failure-green-groups-respond-to-governments-marine-strategy/>

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/pa-documents/powering-healthy-seas-report\\_rspb\\_august-2022.pdf](https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/pa-documents/powering-healthy-seas-report_rspb_august-2022.pdf)

<sup>12</sup><https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2022/june/bird-flu-outbreak-devastates-uk-seabird-colonies.html>

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/pa-documents/powering-healthy-seas-report\\_rspb\\_august-2022.pdf](https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/pa-documents/powering-healthy-seas-report_rspb_august-2022.pdf)

<sup>14</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/02/seals-deafened-noisy-shipping-lanes-say-scientists>

marine animals, and can change important predator-prey interactions and community structure.

### What you can do to help

- The Government's plans to expand offshore drilling, despite the environmental costs, comes as part of a wider package of damaging measures announced in recent weeks that the RSPB and others have called "an attack on nature".<sup>15</sup>
- The Link Marine Group, England's largest coalition of organisations working together for ocean recovery, would be grateful for any action Parliamentarians can take to highlight the marine impacts of this agenda.
- Link would be pleased to help with the drafting of any parliamentary questions to ask the Government to consider safeguards to protect the marine environment from the new wave of offshore drilling, and to assist with supporting any other parliamentary interventions to highlight the impacts of drilling without environmental protections.

For questions or further information please contact:

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*Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 65 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world*  
[www.wcl.org.uk](http://www.wcl.org.uk)

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/rspb-news/rspb-news-stories/uk-government-attack-on-nature/>