HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON HABITAT ISSUE

National

Endangered Species Act Exemptions for Oil and Gas Activities

On March 31, the Department of the Interior's Endangered Species Committee met to consider an Endangered Species Act exemption for the Gulf of America Oil and Gas Activities. The meeting was open to the public and a recording will be available; however, no public comment period was provided in the Federal notice. The HC is concerned that this decision could set a precedent for similar exemptions for renewed oil and gas activities and deep-sea mining along the West Coast.

Regional

Columbia River Dam Operations

On February 25th, a Federal judge directed Federal agencies to reinstate many dam operations on the Columbia and Snake rivers that were part of the 2023 Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement (RCBA), which the Administration rescinded in 2025. The court also ordered additional spillage that was not part of the RCBA, which the plaintiffs proposed to offset the loss of RCBA funding, coordination, and dam breaching studies. The order requires spill at eight dams from March to mid-November, to aid downstream salmon migration. Increases from RCBA-level spill include high levels of spring spill for 24 hours/day (rather than 16 hours/day) at John Day Dam in the spring (most other dams already spilled to those levels 24 hours/day), moderate levels of summer spill through August 31 rather than July 31, and low level spill 24 hours/day for adult steelhead during most of fall and again late winter/early spring (up from a few hours of this spill every other day). It also mandates returning reservoir elevations to 2025 standards, which will maintain recent practices that moderately lower reservoir levels behind the dams (the plaintiffs asked for still lower reservoir levels, but the judge rejected that request). For juvenile salmon, increased spill reduces the likelihood of passing through turbines and speeds their downstream movement, while lower reservoir levels increase water velocity, making passage easier. Together, these changes reduce exposure to predators and warm water conditions.

The preliminary injunction is the first major change to dam operations since litigation against the 2020 Columbia River System Operations Biological Opinion was revived. The litigation is led by the National Wildlife Federation and the State of Oregon, and is supported by plaintiff-aligned amicus parties, including the State of Washington, the Yakama Nation, and the Nez Perce Tribe.

On March 27th, federal defendants U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service notified the U.S. District Court that they are challenging the February 25 decision in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The Federal defendants have asked that the action be stayed.

California

Bureau of Ocean Energy Management Oil and Gas Leasing Program off California

On February 27, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) published a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) for oil and gas development off California, foregoing a draft PEIS. The NOI initiated a 30-day comment period and identified three alternatives to be analyzed in the PEIS: the No Action Alternative, a California coastwide alternative and a southern California alternative limited to the use of existing oil and gas infrastructure. The California coastwide alternative is BOEM's primary alternative.

On March 30, the Council transmitted its comment letter to BOEM recommending the No Action Alternative. The Council's comments emphasize the significant risks of renewed offshore oil and gas development to the marine environment, fisheries, and fishing communities. The Council's letter is posted on the PFMC Correspondence page.

Oil Pipeline Operations off Santa Barbara

On March 14, crude oil resumed flowing through offshore pipelines near Santa Barbara that had been shut down since the 2015 Refugio oil spill. The restart followed an order from the U.S. Department of Energy, issued a day earlier, directing Sable Offshore Corp. to reactivate the Las Flores Pipeline System, which carries oil from offshore platforms to an onshore processing facility. The directive was authorized under the Defense Production Act through an executive order.

The pipelines had originally been shut down after the 2015 rupture, which released more than 100,000 gallons of crude oil. The spill caused extensive environmental harm, affecting marine ecosystems, fisheries, and coastal communities along roughly 150 miles of shoreline. Fishing was suspended across a 138-mile stretch for over a month, and the incident was considered California's most severe oil spill in 25 years.

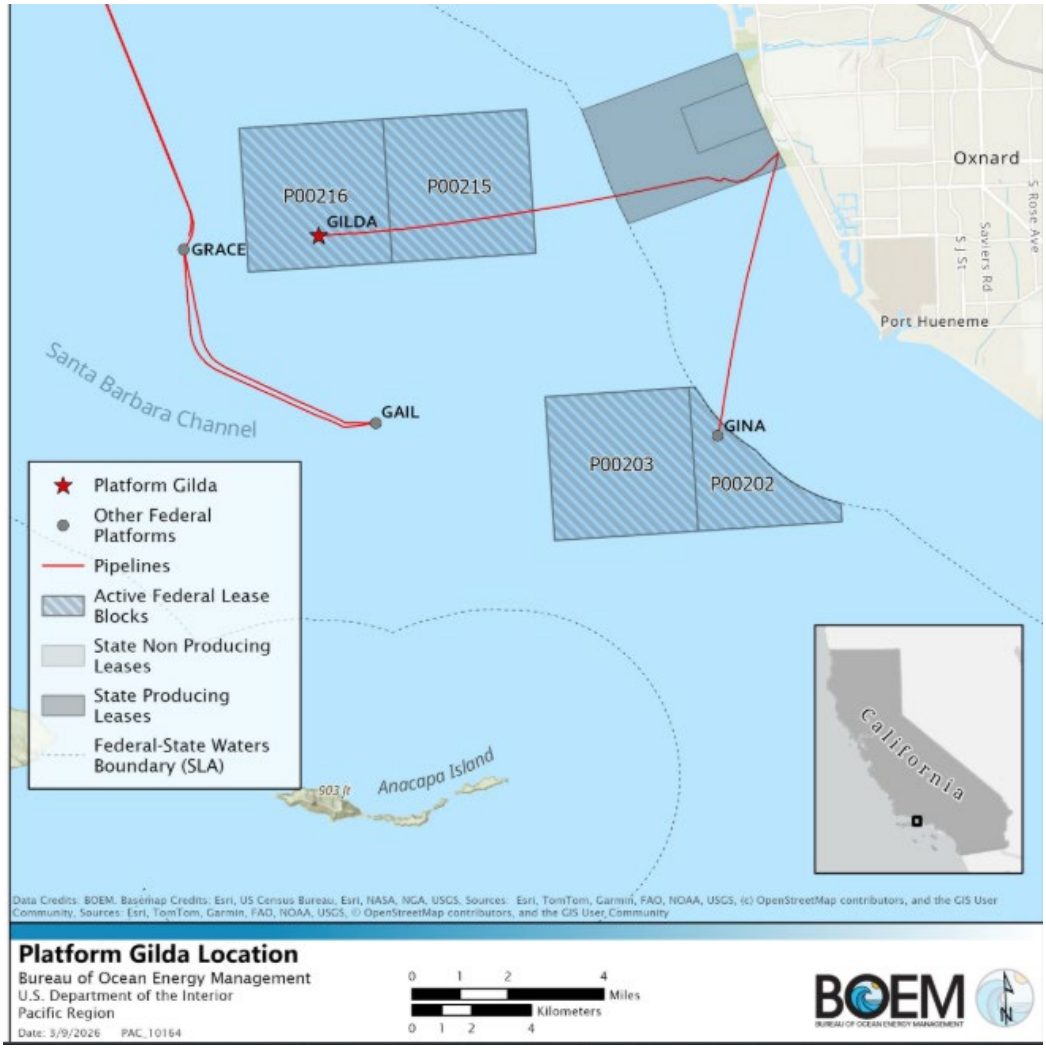
At present, two of Sable's offshore platforms have resumed operations, producing a combined total of about 52,000 barrels of oil per day. Meanwhile, the State of California has filed a lawsuit against DOE, arguing that the order violates state law and a judicial consent decree approved by a U.S. District Court that recognized the state's authority to approve any restart of the onshore pipelines. The pipelines pass through the boundary area of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary along the Gaviota Coast in California State waters.

Platform Gilda Well Stimulation - Hydraulic Fracturing

BOEM has issued a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS for hydraulic fracturing on 16 existing wells at Platform Gilda, located about nine miles offshore of Ventura County, and in close proximity to the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary.

The environmental review is being expedited under the Department of the Interior's "*Alternative Arrangements for NEPA Compliance During a National Energy Emergency*". The NOI was issued on March 18th with a 10-day public scoping period and the EIS is to be published within 28 days of the NOI. The notice does not indicate that a draft EIS will be prepared and that this will be the final EIS, therefore there was no opportunity for the Council to comment on the EIS. A map of the project site is shown below.

The HC has broader concerns about the growing number of Federal actions that alter the National Environmental Protection Act requirements, accelerate the pace of recent Federal decisions, and provide limited opportunities for meaningful public engagement.



Outer Continental Shelf Minerals Exploration

BOEM is proposing to reduce regulatory provisions related to Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) minerals other than oil, gas, and sulfur ("hard minerals"). Hard minerals refer to seabed polymetallic nodules and seafloor geologic features containing deposits of strategic minerals such as nickel, cobalt, copper, manganese, titanium, and rare earth elements. On Feb. 23, 2026, BOEM announced a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to update regulations governing offshore hard-mineral mining and to clarify or streamline provisions related to prospecting, leasing, and operations. This includes developing a National Offshore Critical Minerals Inventory (NOCMI), which will use information collected from the U.S. Geologic Survey and NOAA to locate and assess deposits of hard minerals to be consistent with Executive Order (E.O.) 14285, "Unleashing America's Offshore Critical Minerals and Resources", E.O. 14154 "Unleashing American

Energy", and E.O. 14192 "Unleashing Prosperity through Deregulation". This process has already begun in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam and is likely to extend to the Pacific OCS in the future. A recent recorded seminar provides additional information on technical and environmental aspects of deep-sea mining.

California Fish and Game Commission - MPA Petition Determinations

In 2023, the California Fish and Game Commission (FGC) received 20 petitions that proposed changes to the state's marine protected area network. These petitions propose amendments to regulations governing California's MPAs and/or changes to the MPA management program. CDFW will continue to evaluate and provide recommendations on the petitions for FGC to decide on the proposed changes to California's MPA network. Discussion on all petitions by the full Commission will occur at four regional public Commission meetings in April and May.

Associations of Commercial Fisheries and Cold-Water Corals and Sponges

Dr. Jennifer Selgrath from the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation presented to the HC on research examining the associations between commercially fished species and cold-water corals and sponges. The researchers compiled California fishery landing data to identify a list of commercially harvested fish and invertebrates. Associations of these species with corals and sponges were identified through review of existing survey data, including trawl, remotely operated vehicle, autonomous underwater vehicle and human-operated vehicle surveys. They found that approximately 30 percent of the species analyzed had a spatial association with coral and/or sponge habitat. One of Dr. Selgrath's key recommendations was to move towards repeatable standardized research surveys rather than broad methods such as exploration, characterization, or trawl-based surveys. Focused research could provide insight into the importance of these habitats for commercially harvested species. This approach could assist with existing data gaps and supplement future groundfish EFH reviews.

PFMC
04/09/2026