

Suit criticizes review of proposed oil projects, 37 leases off Santa Barbara at issue

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Ten environmental groups filed a lawsuit in federal court Wednesday charging that the U.S. Interior Department didn't adequately investigate whether new oil drilling off the northern Santa Barbara coast would harm wildlife.

The organizations, including the Otter Project and the Surfrider Foundation, are arguing in the U.S. District Court in Oakland that the federal government didn't study long-term effects from 37 contested leases.

"These leases pose the single greatest threat of new oil drilling in California waters," said the suit. The government, it said, ignored possible problems from acoustic surveys detrimental to fish and marine mammals.

"We've never sued anybody before. But oil is literally death to sea otters," said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, who says the review didn't take into account the possible effects on 2,825 otters, all that's left of the southern population listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

"There is nothing more urgent for sea otter recovery than to block any further offshore oil development that could impact their range," Shimek said.

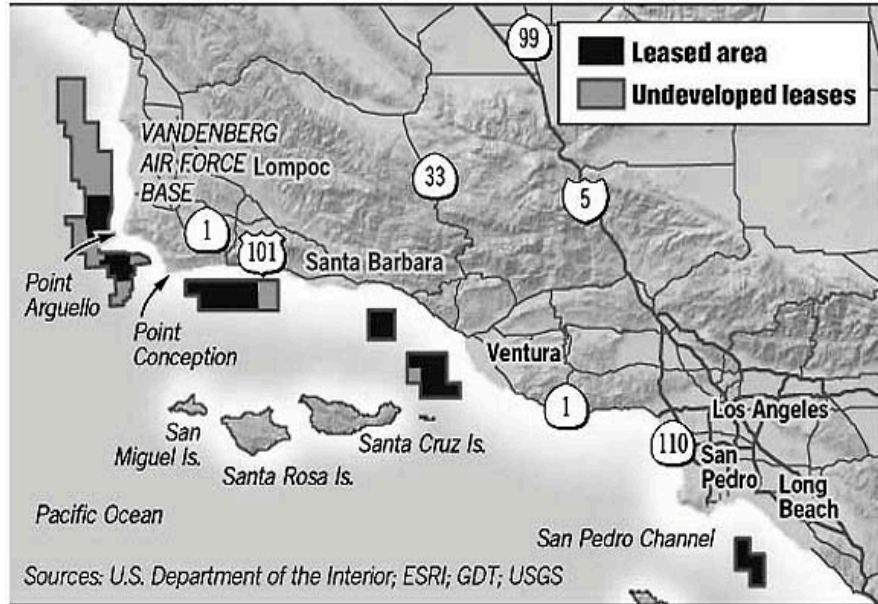
The lawsuit was the result of an Interior decision last month that there would be no significant environmental impact from oil activities on the 37 leases.

John Romero, spokesman for Interior's Minerals Management Service, which has prime authority for leasing federal offshore energy projects, said the agency "had just received the filing and hadn't had an opportunity to evaluate it."

Interior sold the leases between 1968 and 1984, but they've never been developed. Aera Energy holds 20 leases; Plains Exploration and Production Co., seven leases; Sameden Oil Corp., six leases; and Veneco and Arguello Inc., two leases each.

The state, joined by environmental groups, has already won a case in the same court by arguing that Interior had to conduct a full environmental review before it could extend the life of the leases. An extension would keep them viable.

The California Coastal Commission also won the right to review the environmental effects of the 37 leases before they could be extended, which it is doing.



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