

October 18, 2024

Dear Reader:

The enclosed document, *Draft Environmental Assessment for Marine Geophysical Surveys in the Northwestern Gulf of Mexico, 2025* (Draft EA; DOE/EA-2267D), was prepared by the Department of Energy's (DOE) National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL) in accordance with Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq., and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. The Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates the potential environmental consequences of a project to be conducted by the University of Texas, with additional funding from the Department of Energy (DOE), involving a high-resolution 3-dimensional (HR3D) marine seismic surveys off the coast of Texas. The surveys would involve the use of up to two generator-injector (GI) airguns towed behind a source vessel in water less than 30 meters deep. The purpose of the proposed seismic surveys is to study the geologic environments beneath the Gulf of Mexico for secure, long-term, large-scale carbon dioxide storage and enhanced hydrocarbon recovery.

This Draft EA evaluates the potential impacts of the proposed project on various environmental resource areas. Based on initial impact screening evaluations, DOE determined that the project is likely to adversely affect (by harassment via the introduction of impulsive sound into the ocean) several species that could be found within the survey area that are listed under the ESA under the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) jurisdiction: the endangered leatherback, hawksbill, and Kemp's ridley sea turtles, and the threatened Northwest Atlantic distinct population segment (DPS) of loggerhead sea turtle, North Atlantic DPS of green sea turtle, and South Atlantic DPS of green sea turtle. No effects are anticipated on ESA-listed marine mammals, although the project may also have an incidental effect ('Take by Harassment') on non-listed dolphin species. With the planned monitoring and mitigation measures, unavoidable impacts to each species of marine mammal or sea turtle that could be encountered would be expected to be limited to short-term, localized changes in behavior and distribution near the seismic vessel. The project may also affect fish and marine invertebrate species that are known to occur in the survey area, including those listed as threatened under the ESA (oceanic whitetip shark and giant manta ray). However, no adverse effects on fish or marine invertebrate species are expected.

DOE determined that the project would have no or negligible impacts on terrestrial biological resources, land use, safety and hazardous materials and management, geological resources (topography, geology, and soil), air quality, water resources, visual resources, and socioeconomics. In this Draft EA, potential cumulative impacts of the proposed project with other past, present, or future actions are also evaluated, and no adverse cumulative impacts are identified.

Invitation to Comment

Under the NEPA process, DOE is consulting with interested federal, state, regional, and local agencies, as well as the public. DOE invites interested parties to comment on this Draft EA during a 30-day public comment period that begins on October 18, 2024, and ends November 18, 2024. Submit comments to:

Johnna Sholtis, Ph.D.
NEPA Compliance Officer
Department of Energy – National Energy Technology Laboratory
626 Cochran Mill Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15236
Email: Johnna.Sholtis@netl.doe.gov

Envelopes and the subject line of emails should be labeled “Marine Geophysical Surveys Draft EA Comments.” Comments received after the close of the comment period will be considered to the extent practicable.

Individual names and addresses, including email addresses, received as part of the comment documents normally are considered part of the public record. Persons wishing to withhold his or her name, address, or other identifying information from the public record must state this request prominently at the beginning of the comment document. DOE will honor this request to the extent allowable by law. All submissions from organizations, businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses will be included in the public record and open to public inspection in their entirety.

Thank you for your interest in the Marine Geophysical Surveys in the Northwestern Gulf of Mexico and this Draft EA. For further information on the Draft EA or to request additional copies, please contact Dr. Johnna Sholtis as noted above. The Draft EA can also be accessed from DOE’s National Energy Technology Laboratory website at <https://netl.doe.gov/node/6939>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Johnna Sholtis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Johnna" being more prominent than the last name "Sholtis".

Johnna Sholtis, Ph.D.
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment: Draft Environmental Assessment for Marine Geophysical Surveys by the University of Texas in the Northwestern Gulf of Mexico, 2025