

# Interior Department Decision Imperils California's Coast

## Secretary Norton Appeals Court Decision Granting State Review of Offshore Drilling Activities

by CalPIRG

(San Francisco, CA) In January Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton took another significant step toward opening up more of California's coast to environmentally devastating oil and gas drilling. The Department of the Interior (DOI) filed its principal brief with the U.S. Court of Appeal for the Ninth Circuit on appeal from a June 2001 decision by the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California in the case California v. Norton. The district court decided in favor of the State of California in the lawsuit filed by the State of California in 1999. The district court agreed with the State of California that the Minerals Management Service ("MMS," a part of the Department of the Interior) violated federal environmental laws when it extended the terms of 36 undeveloped oil and gas leases off the coast of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

The court found that the MMS failed to comply with federal laws that require consideration of the environmental effects of the lease extensions, as well as require the MMS to submit its decisions to the State for determination that granting the extensions is consistent with the California Coastal Management Plan. Several environmental groups, including CALPIRG, Environmental Defense Center and NRDC, intervened on behalf of the State in its lawsuit against the Department. Several oil companies intervened on behalf of the Department. "We are very disappointed that the Secretary has decided to appeal the district court's decision, especially since the district court unequivocally decided in favor of protecting California's coast," said Teri Olle, staff attorney at the California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG), one of the intervening plaintiffs. "It's also curious that this appeal comes on the heels of the President's visit to California last Saturday, where he expressly stated that he believed there was a way to find oil in an environmentally friendly way without drilling off the coast of California," said Olle. Day to day drilling operations generate a slew of toxic metals and pollution. Over its lifetime, a single rig can drill between 50-100 wells, each dumping 25,000 pounds of toxic metals, such as lead, chromium and mercury, and potent carcinogens like toluene, benzene and xylene into the ocean. In addition, a single rig can pollute the air as much as 7,000 cars each driving 50 miles per day. The risk of a devastating spill, like the one in 1969 off Santa Barbara, remains imminent; even the Department of the Interior predicts a 94% likelihood of a major oil spill off the California coast within the next 30 years.

"All of this risk, and for what?" said Teri Olle. "The recent energy crisis in California highlights the folly of an energy policy overly dependent on fossil fuels. Even modest

improvements in auto efficiency would save eight times as much energy over the next 20 years as the total estimated oil and gas reserves off of California." In addition, California could reduce its reliance on fossil fuels by investing in renewable sources of energy. Experts have determined that California could generate 25 percent of its electric power from wind, solar and geothermal energy. "This is a state's rights issue. The people of California, the Governor, and the Attorney General, have spoken time and time again - we don't want more drilling. The federal government should respect California's right to protect its coast," said Olle.

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