



March 25, 2015

CERTIFIED US MAIL

Attention: Mr. Geoffrey L. Wikel, Acting Chief, Division of Environmental Assessment, Office of Environmental Program (HM 3107), Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, 381 Elden St. Herndon, VA 20170-4817

RE: *Scoping Comments for the 2017-2022 Proposed Oil and Gas Leasing Program Programmatic EIS*

Dear President Obama and Secretary Jewell:

As board members of the **Virginia Beach Restaurant Association (VBRA)**, we have recently voted to oppose the **2017-2022 BOEM Offshore Oil and Gas Leasing Program for the Mid-Atlantic Coast**, which includes the Commonwealth of Virginia.

We did not take this decision lightly. We sincerely want what is best for our community, our state and nation. At this point, however, we feel there are too many unanswered questions related to this proposal. The **VBRA** is composed of a diverse group of restaurants and food retail establishments who contribute to our local economy and tax base, so we consider this a vital issue to our economic welfare.

For over a century, tourism and tourism-related business in Virginia Beach - including restaurants, lodging, recreational activities among others - are not only a primary part of our city's tax base and business foundation, they are emblematic of Virginia Beach. There are many important parts to our local economy, but tourism is without question our most important part. It has grown from a seasonal industry of quaint Oceanside cottages and salt water taffy to one that is active 365 days a year. Virginia's beaches account for almost 10 percent of our state's tourists, and restaurant sales in Virginia Beach have exceeded more than \$1 billion for the past two years.

The success or failure of our industry depends on a number of factors, not all of them within our control. Going forward with the BOEM program, as we understand it, could well be detrimental to our industry.

We are concerned that if the program is approved, disasters like the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded and killed 11 people in the Gulf of Mexico in April of 2010 could possibly occur here. More than 200 million gallons of crude oil were pumped into the Gulf of Mexico for a total of 87 days, making it the biggest oil spill in U.S. history. Over 16,000 total miles of coastline have been affected, including the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

Even though the gushing well was capped in July 2010, oil is still washing up on shores, which will likely cause long-term damages to people living in the area. This kind of disaster would cripple our industry and economy.

Proponents of the proposed BOEM program point to the economic benefits of such a proposal. These "benefits" are not clear to us and have not been made clear at any point since this proposal was revived this past year.

We understand that your administration created a \$20 billion spill response fund for the Gulf disaster (we do not think that it is economically prudent for this type of measure to be repeated for the mid-Atlantic region). We also know that British Petroleum is responsible for close to \$40 billion in fines, cleanup costs, and settlements as a result of the oil spill in 2010, with an additional \$16 billion due to the Clean Water Act. This is a major concern to us, and a warning of what we could be dealing with in the future.

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To this day, the Gulf is still polluted with oil and materials used to combat and clean up the spill. When you add these costs together, you must ask: Do the economic gains from such a program outweigh these economic costs?

An often underplayed lesson we can also learn from the Gulf is the reality of smaller oil spills and environmental disasters occurring on the coast every day. The risk of a big spill from miles offshore is great, but developing this resource would bring certainty that the Virginia coast will be stained with smaller spills from oil tankers and storm-damaged infrastructure and carved up with pipelines and refineries. The dirty industrialization of the coast required to support the oil industry will be at odds with the strong existing tourism and fishing industries dependent on clean beaches, water, and fisheries. We hope you understand the major concerns that our Coastal Virginia communities will have to face because of the destructive transformation that is most likely to occur once the oil and gas industries make a home off of our coast.

We do not mean to play the role of combatants on this issue - we welcome any information, facts or discussions that you might have that would further enlighten us and put to rest the fears and concerns our members have on such a vital issue. As we mentioned, however, our livelihoods and the success of our city and its economy rests squarely on tourism and its collateral industries. The threats and concerns of such a program have initiated a great number of discussions about this throughout our industry. From the **Virginia Beach Restaurant Association** board's perspective, the BOEM proposal would not provide any benefits to our thriving and growing hospitality industry. It was also clear to the board that the proposal presented potential significant harm to our environment.

We share the concerns voiced by the United States Navy in feeling that this proposal would not be beneficial to our community. We believe that this is true not only because of the potential negative financial impact that could result, but also for the well-being of our customers and the future of our families.

We respect your position in this matter, and we welcome any information you feel we should be aware of so that we can inform our members.

Respectfully,

William Gambrell, President      Laura Wood Habr, Vice President

Virginia Beach Restaurant Association

cc: Virginia Beach Restaurant Association Board Members; Senator Tim Kaine; Senator Mark Warner; Congressman Scott Riegel; Governor of Virginia Terry McAuliffe; Lt Governor Ralph Northam; Senator McWaters; Senator Frank Wagner; Delegate Barry Knight; Delegate Chris Stolle; Delegate Bill DeSteph; Delegate Ron Villanueva, Delegate Glen Davis; Mayor Will Sessoms and Virginia Beach City Council members; Jim Spore, Virginia Beach City Manager; Doug Smith, Virginia Beach Deputy City Manager; Robert Matthias, Intergovernmental Relations; Jim Ricketts, Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, Director of Tourism; Mike Eason, Virginia Beach Resort Advisory Commission; Eric Terry, President, Virginia Hospitality And Travel Association