

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF SAFETY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT
GULF OF MEXICO OCS REGION**

NTL No. NTL 2019-G05

Effective Date: May 10, 2019

NOTICE TO LESSEES AND OPERATORS OF FEDERAL OIL AND GAS LEASES
AND PIPELINE RIGHT-OF-WAY HOLDERS, OUTER CONTINENTAL SHELF, GULF OF MEXICO OCS REGION

Site Clearance and Verification for Decommissioned Wells, Platforms, and Other Facilities

This Notice to Lessees and Operators and Pipeline Right-of-way Holders (NTL) supersedes NTL No. 98-26, *Minimum Interim Requirements for Site Clearance (and Verification) of Abandoned Oil and Gas Structures in the Gulf of Mexico*, effective November 30, 1998. It updates the guidance on this topic.

Guidance

The following guidance regarding site clearance and verification of decommissioned wells, platforms, and other facilities is listed by regulatory reference:

1. 30 CFR 250.1703(a)

30 CFR 250.1703(a) requires you to get approval from the appropriate District Manager before decommissioning wells and from the Regional Supervisor before decommissioning platforms and pipelines or other facilities. To do so, you must submit an application for approval in accordance with 30 CFR 250.1712 and 30 CFR 250.1727. As part of your final application for approval to remove a platform or other facility, you must develop a procedural plan for site clearance and verification activities and submit it to the Regional Supervisor, Office of Structural and Technical Support (OSTS) for approval (30 CFR 250.1727). For wells, you must develop and submit a similar plan to the appropriate District Manager for approval with the Application for Permit to Modify (APM, Form BSEE-124) for the associated well (30 CFR 250.1712). At a minimum (and as applicable for the proposed methodology), your plan should include the proposed:

- Verification method and details (30 CFR 250.1740); and
- Verification grid, noting all applicable features (30 CFR 250.1741(a), (f), (g), and 250.1742.).

To allow for appropriate oversight, you should notify the appropriate District Manager for well sites or the Regional Supervisor for platform or other facility sites at least 48 hours before you begin the site clearance and verification work.

2. 30 CFR 250.1703(e) and 30 CFR 250.1703(f)

Under the general requirements for decommissioning set forth in 30 CFR 250.1703(e), you must clear the seafloor of all obstructions created by your lease and/or right-of-way (ROW). The purpose of site clearance is to remove all obstructions, including debris created, used, deposited, accumulated, or abandoned on the seabed during lease and pipeline ROW operations so that they do not interfere with other uses of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS). You must remove all obstructions, including obstructions identified or located outside of the minimum clearance areas identified under 30 CFR 250.1741(a). You may remove obstructions from the seabed using heavy-duty trawls, diver assistance, remotely-operated vehicles (ROV), or other methods approved by the appropriate District Manager or Regional Supervisor. The regulations address subsequent verification methodologies to determine if the site is clear of obstructions at 30 CFR 250.1740 – 250.1742.

You should immediately report any obstructions temporarily left outside of the minimum clearance areas, including any debris dragged and dropped or trawling gear lost during site clearance, to BSEE at Decomm-Environmental@bsee.gov to allow the bureau to notify other OCS users in the vicinity of the obstructions. You should provide a description of the material (if the material was observed prior to being dropped) or the gear, the area and block, the approximate coordinates, and the permit number under which the work is being conducted. In accordance with 30 CFR 250.1741(c), you must mark the area to be cleared as a hazard to navigation according to USCG requirements until you complete site clearance

3. 30 CFR 250.1740

Under 30 CFR 250.1740, you must complete all obstruction removal and subsequent verification work within 60 days of permanently plugging a well or removing a platform/facility. You are also required to verify that the site is clear of obstructions by one of several methods, including dragging a trawl over a well site. If obstructions exist, the use of a trawl may or may not actually remove these obstructions. If the trawl or other verification method used indicates that an obstruction exists that is not removed, a method or means must be identified to remove the obstruction. You should not deposit any objects outside the minimum grid area for any reason and, if you do, you must verify that such objects have been removed under 30 CFR 250.1740. If you determine that obstruction removal and/or verification efforts will require additional time to complete, BSEE GOMR recommends that you request a departure under 30 CFR 250.142 from the District Manager or Regional Supervisor prior to the regulatory deadline. Your extension request should include a summary of all site clearance work completed to date at the location and the reason for the additional time (e.g., significant amount of debris, obstruction/snag investigation(s) and recovery, complexity of the verification operations).

4. 30 CFR 250.1741

If you use a trawl, you must follow the survey requirements that pertain to the specific type of well or facility removed as set forth in 30 CFR § 250.1741. The minimum distance requirements are designed to protect pipelines, shipwrecks, and sensitive biological features as well as to ensure that there are no obstructions remaining on the seabed, including but not limited to those that may impact future fishing operations. However, BSEE may include conditions to an approval under 30 CFR § 250.1703(a) that require greater avoidance distances to ensure adequate protection of identified, protected resources within or near the trawl area.

5. 30 CFR 250.1741(a)

The circular trawl areas where the trawl is dragged in a grid-like pattern as required under 30 CFR 250.1741(a) are based on the potential drift of debris inadvertently lost during normal operations. In situations where the areas identified in the regulation do not include all of the debris (*e.g.*, such as that lost during storms or lost from damaged or toppled facilities), BSEE GOMR may require additional areas to be included in the area to be trawled during its review and approval of the procedural plan to ensure that the site is clear of obstructions, as required under 30 CFR 250.1740.

BSEE considers a “well protector jacket” (listed in 30 CFR 250.1741(a)(4)) to include any temporary structure (*e.g.*, well protector, well jacket) protecting a well during exploration activities, which is most often maintained without quarters, processing units, and other equipment associated with production and development operations.

6. 30 CFR 250.1741(b)

Under 30 CFR 250.1741(b), [you](#) must trawl 100 percent of the limits described in 250.1741(a) in two directions. To ensure the 100 percent required trawl coverage of the clearance grids/trawling area, you should use the appropriate grid pattern as follows:

- A. A 40-ft grid pattern for vessels equipped with two 50- to 65-ft nets or four 30-ft nets;
- B. A 60-ft grid pattern for vessels equipped with two 66- to 80-ft nets or four 31- to 40-ft nets; or
- C. An 80-ft grid pattern for vessels equipped with two 81-ft or larger nets or four 41-ft or larger nets.

If trawling operations are interrupted for any reason and then resumed, changes to the grid pattern may be necessary to ensure that 100 percent coverage of the area is maintained. If you encounter a snag that the trawl could not recover on any grid line, you should retrawl the grid line. In order to verify that the site is clear of obstructions, you should record the location of all lost or snagged site clearance trawling equipment (heavy-duty and verification nets, lines, doors, chains, etc.). If you are not able to recover lost gear or snag after successive trawling, then you must: 1) mark the location as a hazard to navigation according to U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) requirements; 2) investigate the obstruction (using sonar, ROV, diver, etc.); 3) remove the gear and OCS-related obstructions and debris (if applicable) from the seabed using an alternative method; and 4) retrawl the grid line to ensure 100 percent coverage.

7. 30 CFR 250.1741(c)

Unmarked obstructions pose a hazard to other OCS users which can lead to vessel or equipment damage and has the potential to cause harm or injury to the personnel. To prevent other OCS users, primarily commercial shrimpers/trawlers, from snagging their gear on unremoved obstructions and debris at well abandonment and platform removal sites, you are required under 30 CFR 250.1741(c) to mark the location as a hazard to navigation according to USCG requirements until you complete the site clearance and verification work. Information on buoy specifications and associated permitting is available from the USCG Eighth District Office, Waterways Branch – Private Aids to Navigation Section (PATON), 500 Poydras St. Suite 1230, New Orleans, LA 70130; Phone: (504) 671-2330 or 671-2328; or via email at d8OANpaton@USCG.mil.

Pursuant to 30 CFR 250.142, you may request a departure from the obligation to mark the site from the District Manager or Regional Supervisor when existing platforms or facilities are within close proximity or when other conditions exist that would prevent commercial trawlers from potentially being impacted by unremoved obstructions, including debris. If the situation(s) exist before you submit your procedural plan, you should include the departure request and justifying circumstances in the plan for bureau consideration and approval.

8. 30 CFR 250.1741(d)

Under 30 CFR 250.1741(d) you must use a trawling vessel equipped with a calibrated navigational positioning system capable of providing position accuracy of ± 30 feet. The calibrated navigation system on the trawling vessel should be capable of producing either (1) a real-time paper track plot of the vessel position or (2) a hard copy post-plot of all or any specific lines so that you can verify that the area has been satisfactorily covered before the vessel departs. The plot should use a scale no smaller than 1 inch = 400 ft and show the vessel track as a continuous line.

9. 30 CFR 250.1741(e) and Endangered Species Act Compliance Conditions

For debris removal, you may use heavy-duty nets of any size or net strength. 30 CFR 250.1741(d) requires that for final verification work, the trawling net be representative of those used in the commercial fishing industry (one that has a net strength equal or greater than that provided by No. 18 twine). The Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation Biological Opinion issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service, dated August 28, 2006 (available at https://www.boem.gov/Environmental-Stewardship/Environmental-Studies/Gulf-of-Mexico-Region/ESA_Biological_Opinion-pdf.aspx), identifies a number of additional terms and conditions designed to control incidental take. The nets used for both debris removal and verification must not be equipped with turtle excluder devices (TEDs) so that objects picked up by the trawl do not escape. Trawl nets must have a minimum stretched mesh size of 4 inches at the cod end and 2 inches elsewhere, and a maximum stretched mesh size of 6 inches. You should notify the USCG, Eighth District, Enforcement Branch at least 48 hours before you conduct trawling operations with a net not equipped with a TED. You must release any shrimp caught in

the net. You must also limit trawl times to no more than 30 minutes to allow for the removal and release of any captured sea turtles. If a sea turtle is captured in the trawl, you must:

- Contact BSEE's Office of Environmental Compliance (OEC) by phone and at protectedspecies@bsee.gov and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Regional Office (SERO) at takereport.nmfs@noaa.gov immediately;
- Resuscitate and release any captured sea turtles as per NMFS' guidelines found online at https://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/turtles/TM_NMFS_SEFSC_580_2010.pdf (see page 3-6; Plate 3-1).
- Photograph the turtle, and complete a Sea Turtle Stranding Form for each turtle caught in your nets (<https://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/species/turtles/strandings.htm>) and submit the form to NMFS and BSEE (to the email addresses noted above).

10. **30 CFR 250.1741(f)**

Under 30 CFR 250.1741(f), you must ensure that you trawl no closer than 300 feet from a shipwreck, and 500 feet from a sensitive biological feature. If known archaeological resources, shipwrecks, or sensitive biological features are in the vicinity of the site clearance and verification location, the environmental analyses prepared for the Application for Permit to Modify (APM) or the structure removal application will identify sufficient mitigation, minimization, or avoidance measures to protect the resources, which BSEE may implement through conditions of approval. You must adhere to any conditions of approval during the trawling activities, and satisfy the associated reporting requirements.

If trawling activities indicate the presence of a previously-unidentified biologic or archaeological resource (*e.g.*, recovery in the nets of corals, rocks, or any object of potential archaeological significance), you must cease trawling work and contact OEC immediately for additional guidance. If trawling activities recover any object of potential biological or archaeological significance, you must immediately halt operations in compliance with 30 CFR 250.1741(f) and 250.194(c) and immediately report this discovery and its location coordinates to the OEC via email at Env-Compliance-Arc@bsee.gov and by phone at (504) 736-2796. BSEE will provide you additional guidance for the protection of any potential biological or archaeological resources and how to continue with the site clearance and verification work.

11. **30 CFR 250.1741(g)**

If you trawl near an active pipeline, you must meet the requirements in the table set forth in 30 CFR 250.1741(g). BSEE may require you to conduct debris detection, recovery, and verification using other methods (in place of or in addition to trawling), which may require revision and resubmittal of the procedural plan associated with your application pursuant to 30 CFR 250.1712 and 30 CFR 250.1727. In areas where trawling is prohibited by 250.1741(g), you must conduct obstruction detection, recovery, and site clearance verification by the other methods listed in 30 CFR 250.1742, or as approved by BSEE.

Additionally, BSEE recommends that you conduct a seabed survey of the area using remote sensing tools (*e.g.*, side-scan/sector-scanning sonar, magnetometers, ROV video) to obtain information about the current condition of any pipelines in the area before you begin trawling to avoid unnecessary snags-to and unearthing-of decommissioned pipelines and/or damage to active pipelines and the risk of potential pollution events.

12. **30 CFR 250.1742(a)**

For site clearance verification with sonar equipment, your procedural plan should provide for:

- identifying targets of potential debris;
- stating the size and shape of debris that can be detected;
- achieving 100 percent coverage of the appropriate grid area at required resolution;
- the investigation and identification of targets detected in the sonar survey;
- the recovery of targets identified as debris/obstructions in the investigation; and
- documentation and verification that targets identified as debris/obstructions have been removed.

In addition, BSEE typically prefers that the sonar equipment and deployment:

- Operates at a nominal 500 kHz frequency (or equivalent);
- Provides overlapping coverage for the verification area;
- Provides scanning along and across track for towed side scan sonar equipment sufficient to identify targets as potential debris; and
- Provides sector scanning sonar deployment sufficient to identify targets as potential debris.

In most cases, where the initial sonar survey identifies obstructions and you conduct subsequent debris recovery work to remove the items from the seabed (generally with diver assistance and support vessel(s)), BSEE may require a second sonar survey to capture the post-retrieval seabed conditions and to provide the "verification" that the site is "cleared." If the initial sonar survey does not detect any obstructions, including debris, you may rely on the sonar records and associated report to verify that the site is cleared.

13. **30 CFR 250.1742(c)**

For site clearance verification with an ROV, your procedural plan should provide for:

- identifying targets of potential debris;
- ROV camera(s) capable of recording 100 percent of the appropriate grid area;
- a survey pattern of concentric circles or parallel lines no more than 10 feet apart;
- the recovery of targets identified as debris/obstructions in the investigation; and
- documentation and verification that targets identified as debris/obstructions have been removed.

Similar to 30 CFR 250.1742(a), if an initial ROV video survey detects obstructions, including debris, and subsequent removal work is required, BSEE may require you to perform a second ROV video to capture the post-retrieval seabed conditions and to

provide verification that the site is cleared.

14. 30 CFR 250.1743(a)(5) and 30 CFR 250.1743(b)(6)

As part of your Application for Permit to Modify (APM) (30 CFR 250.1743(a)) or site clearance verification report (30 CFR 250.1743(b)), you should include:

- Verification method and details (30 CFR 250.1740);
- Verification grid, noting all applicable features (30 CFR 250.1741(a), (f), and (g));
- Vessel navigational positioning system documentation (30 CFR 250.1741(d));
- Net information (30 CFR 250.1741(e));
- Corporate and financial tie statement (30 CFR 250.1741(h)(1)); and
- Copies of the commercial trawling licenses (30 CFR 250.1741(h)(2)).

Under 30 CFR 250.1743, you must certify that the site is clear of obstructions. Your APM or site clearance verification report must include a list of all debris you collected as a result of any of the retrieval methods, including material collected in both the heavy-duty and verification nets, items recovered by divers during snag investigations and retrievals, and any lost or recovered trawling gear. You also should provide digital images depicting the debris removed by your trawling and snag recovery contractors.

15. 30 CFR 250.1743(a)(6) and 30 CFR 250.1743(b)(7)

Your APM or site clearance report post-trawling job plots or maps for both heavy-duty and verification nets should be set at a minimum scale of 1 inch = 200 ft. Both heavy-duty and verification trawl plots or maps should include: proper grid line numbering (including multiple grid passes for retrawls, if any); the center location of the platform, facility, or well; the marked location of all mitigated avoidance areas; and the marked location of any snags, dropped gear, or debris.

Guidance Document Statement

The BSEE issues NTLs as guidance documents in accordance with 30 CFR 250.103 to clarify and provide more detail about certain BSEE regulatory requirements and to outline the information you provide in your various submittals. Under that authority, this NTL sets forth guidance regarding regulatory requirements that provides a clear and consistent approach to complying with those requirements. However, if you wish to use an alternate approach, you may do so, after you receive approval from the appropriate BSEE office.

Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 Statement

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has approved the information collection requirements and assigned OMB Control Numbers 1014-0022 for the subpart A regulations, 1014-0010 for the subpart Q regulations, and 1014-0026 for the APM submissions. This NTL does not impose any additional information collection requirements subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. 3501 et seq.).

Contacts

Please address any questions regarding this NTL to:

1. The Workover/Completion Engineer in the appropriate BSEE GOMR District office regarding site clearance and verification for wells;
2. The BSEE GOMR Office of Structural and Technical Support (OSTS) by telephone at (504) 736-2634 regarding site clearance and verification for platforms or other facilities; or
3. The BSEE GOMR Office of Environmental Compliance (OEC) by telephone at (504) 736-3245 or via email at Decomm-Environmental@bsee.gov regarding environmental concerns (e.g., archaeological resources, protected species, biological features) encountered during either well or platform/facility site clearance and verification work.

/S/ Lars Herbst
 Lars Herbst
 Regional Director
 Gulf of Mexico Region