

**U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
MINERALS MANAGEMENT SERVICE  
GULF OF MEXICO OCS REGION**

NTL No. 98-11

Effective Date: August 10, 1998

NOTICE TO LESSEES AND OPERATORS OF FEDERAL OIL, GAS, AND SULPHUR  
LEASES IN THE OUTER CONTINENTAL SHELF, GULF OF MEXICO OCS REGION

**Implementation of Measures to Detect and Protect Deepwater  
Chemosynthetic Communities**

This notice supersedes NTL 88-11, effective February 1, 1989, and makes minor technical amendments, updates the cited regulatory authorities, and includes a statement regarding the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995.

**Introduction and Background**

Scientists have recently discovered deepwater (greater than 400 meters) chemosynthetic organisms in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM). Chemosynthetic communities are assemblages of tubeworms, clams, mussels, bacteria mats, and other associated organisms. Many of the species, while similar to those of other deepwater areas, including the vent communities of the Galapagos Ridge, are new to science. While these organisms are generally widespread and found in low densities, there are examples of very high densities of the organisms in apparently very small, isolated areas. These areas of high-density communities are apparently associated with hydrocarbon seeps, vents, or gaseous sediments. Oil and gas activities, which disturb the seafloor where such dense communities are located, will cause damage to any of these communities with which they come into contact. Such activities would include (but not be limited to) anchoring, placement of seafloor templates, and installation of pipelines.

Regulatory authority to require avoidance or protection of chemosynthetic communities and avoidance of shallow hazards, such as vents or gaseous sediments, appears at several places in 30 CFR 250. General provisions concerning protection of fish and other aquatic life are at 30 CFR 250.105(a). Specific provisions concerning sea bottom hazards at particular sites are at 30 CFR 250.203(b)(1)(ix) for exploration plans, 30 CFR 250.204(b)(1)(vii) for development and production plans, 30 CFR 250.909(b)(2) for platform foundations, and 30 CFR 250.1007(a)(5) for pipelines.

Detailed data regarding the extent, location, structure, and relationship of these communities to the local geophysical environment are at present unavailable. Currently, the Gulf of Mexico OCS Region (GOMR) requires operators in water depths greater than 400 meters to provide certain data in order to make determinations regarding the possibility of chemosynthetic communities being present and the potential of their being harmed by exploration and development activities. The GOMR previously imposed these requirements on a case-by-case basis; however, since then, the guidance letter dated October 12, 1988, specifies the information

required for Plans of Exploration (POE's) and Development Operations Coordination Documents (DOCD's) for oil and gas leases in the GOM.

## **Purpose and Scope**

It is the purpose of this Notice to Lessees and Operators (NLT) to inform all operators of leases in water depths greater than 400 meters of the requirements that the GOMR currently imposes and to provide a consistent and comprehensive approach that will avoid damage to high-density chemosynthetic communities. The requirements in the Implementation Section below will apply to all operations on GOM leases in water depths greater than 400 meters and will remain in effect until superseded.

## **Implementation**

1. Operators of leases on blocks in water depths of 400 meters or deeper in the GOM will comply with the following:

a. Prior to approvals of Applications for Permit to Drill (APD's) and Pipeline Applications, you will delineate all seafloor areas that would be disturbed by the proposed operations. Additionally, you will furnish an analysis of geophysical information for these areas, as well as any other pertinent information available, that discusses the possibility of disturbing geological phenomena (such as hydrocarbon-charged sediments, seismic wipe-out zones, anomalous mounds or knolls, gas vents, or oil seeps) that could support chemosynthetic organisms.

b. If the subsequent review by the GOMR of the analysis required by 1.a. above results in a determination that high-density chemosynthetic communities may be present and could potentially be harmed by the proposed activities, you will be required to:

(1) modify the application to relocate the proposed operations to avoid impacting possible chemosynthetic communities; or

(2) modify the application to provide additional information (perhaps including a photo-survey, a video-survey, or already available information) that documents whether high-density chemosynthetic communities exist in the areas of concern; or

(3) adhere to certain conditions of plan or application approval such as using a remotely operated vehicle to set anchors precisely or otherwise ensuring that the proposed anchor pattern does not impact chemosynthetic communities, monitoring impacts caused by the proposed work, or adhering to any other condition deemed necessary by the Regional Director.

2. The GOMR may revise the requirements of this section as it receives new information.

## **Paperwork Reduction Act Statement**

The information collection provisions of this notice are intended to provide clarification, description, or interpretation of requirements contained in 30 CFR 250, Subparts B, D, and J. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has approved the information collection requirements for these regulations and assigned OMB Control Numbers 1010-0049, 1010-0053, and 1010-0050, respectively, and 1010-0044 for APD's. This notice does not impose additional information collection requirements subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris C. Oynes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "C" and a long, sweeping underline.

Chris C. Oynes  
Regional Director