

**CLIMATEPROGRESS**

## Judge Blocks Plans For Offshore Drilling In Mississippi

BY KATIE VALENTINE  ON JUNE 23, 2014 AT 5:07 PM



*In this file photo taken Aug. 19, 2008, the Chevron Genesis Oil Rig Platform is seen in the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans, La.*

CREDIT: AP PHOTO/MARY ALTAFFER, FILE

A county judge has temporarily blocked Mississippi's plans for offshore natural gas drilling, saying the Mississippi Development Authority did not properly evaluate the economic impacts the drilling would have in the state.

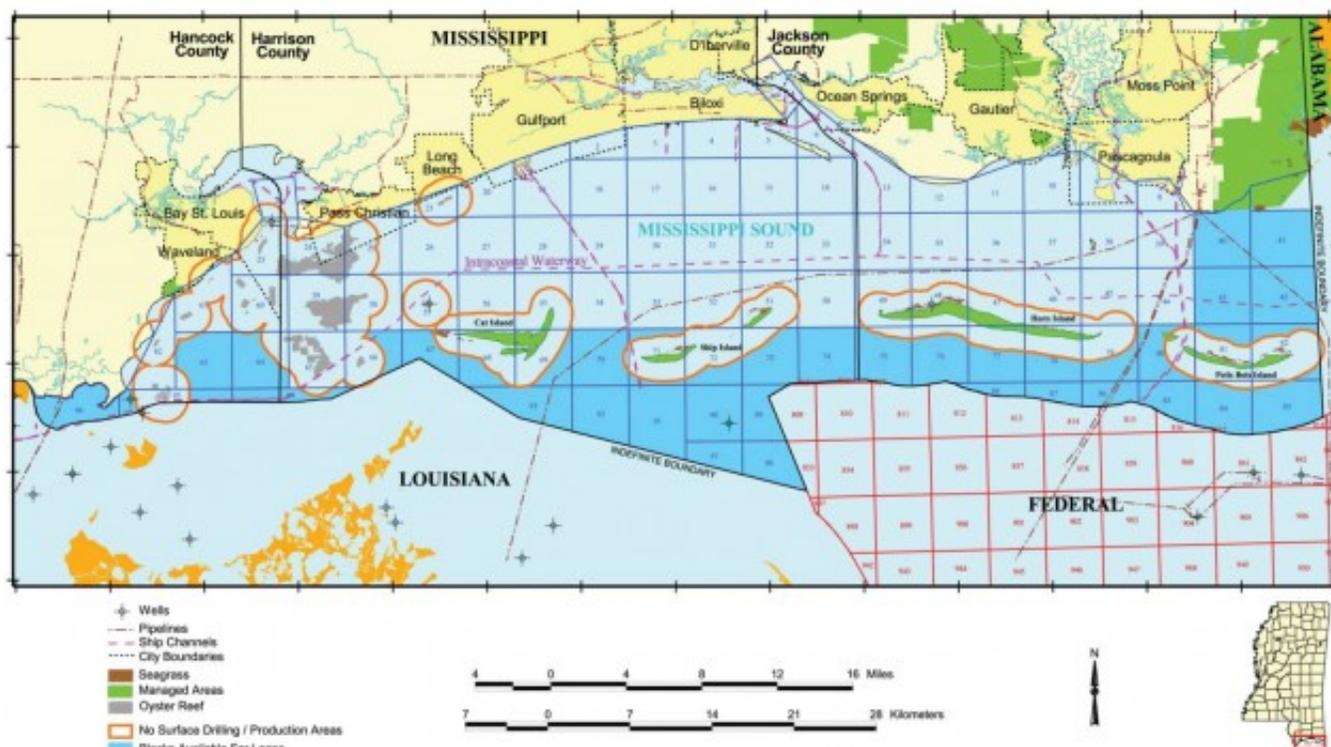
On Thursday, Hinds County Chancery Judge William H. Singletary ruled that proposed regulations opening up parts of Mississippi Sound to drilling leases did not contain an adequate economic impact statement. The statement the MDA submitted, the Judge ruled, looked only at the economic impacts of leasing parts of the sound, and not at the impacts of the drilling itself. This incomplete EIS violated state law, according to the

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“The EIS simply postpones addressing the costs and benefits associated with exploration and extraction until a future study,” the judge wrote in his opinion. “The EIS contains no analysis of impact on small businesses, no comparison of costs and benefits of not adopting the proposed rule, no determination of less costly or less intrusive methods, no description of reasonable alternative methods and no detailed statement of the data and methodology used in making estimates.”

Now, in order to proceed with the offshore drilling rules, the MDA will have to conduct a new economic impact statement “addressing all deficiencies set forth above,” the ruling states. That postpones the drilling rules, which means the Mississippi Sound is safe — for now — from natural gas drilling.



CREDIT: MISSISSIPPI DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

The ruling was in response to a 2012 [lawsuit](#) put forth by the Sierra Club and Gulf Restoration Network, which claimed that the MDA failed to conduct an adequate economic impact statement when drafting rules for drilling in the Mississippi Sound. Helen Rose Patterson, Mississippi Organizer for Gulf Restoration Network, told ThinkProgress that the MDA could appeal the ruling, but said it wasn't likely, due to the strong wording of the judge's ruling. The MDA [told the Sun Herald](#) last week that it was “aware of the court's ruling” and was working with its attorneys to decide on how to proceed.

Patterson said she thinks if the MDA does complete a comprehensive EIS, it would find that drilling in Mississippi Sound wasn't in the state's best interest. One of the group's biggest economic concerns is that drilling in the Mississippi Sound would hit the tourism industry in Mississippi, due to the proximity of the proposed drilling site to Mississippi's barrier islands. Those islands are treasured for camping and fishing by Mississippi's residents, she said, but they also bring tourists from all over the country. Putting gas rigs near those islands would disturb the islands' integrity as wild places — being able to see drilling rig lights and flares doesn't make for a peaceful camping experience, she said.

"They'd be very hard pressed to show that drilling would in fact be the right choice for Mississippi," Patterson said. "There's very little resource out there — very little natural gas, probably no oil — and so it's just hard to see how that tiny bit of fossil fuel would be enough to justify jeopardizing all of those other really important things, including a really important element of quality of life along the coast."

Patterson said she didn't know what the timeline will be for the drilling rules — it all depends on whether the MDA decides to appeal the ruling or whether it decides to complete a new EIS. She said right now, she's working with local officials to try to get them to pass resolutions in support of keeping drilling out of the barrier island region. She said especially in the near future, as restoration money from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill begins to funnel into the Gulf, undertaking projects that could put the waters off the coast of Mississippi in danger of yet another spill wouldn't be smart.

"That money is very much directed towards restoration, and doing things that are completely counter to restoration is just not a wise idea," she said. "I think local communities and their leaders really recognize that — that this money coming from BP is an unprecedented opportunity to really capitalize on using our natural resources in a sustainable way, and bringing in those nature tourism dollars and making sure that we have those things for years and years to come."

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