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Editorials

Judge hears state's case against oil drilling

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OAKLAND — In a case that  [SHARE](#)    ... could lead to more drilling near a marine sanctuary or could leave up to 1 billion barrels of oil untapped, a federal judge has stepped into

a dispute between California and federal officials over offshore oil exploration.

U.S. Judge Claudia Wilkin heard arguments Friday focusing on whether the state has a right to review leases that the U.S. government gave to companies decades ago to search for oil off the California coast. Those leases were extended last year.

Claiming there is nothing to review right now, lawyers for the Department of the Interior said the state will get a chance to review the 36 leases later – perhaps when the oil companies submit revised exploration plans.

Those revised plans could be filed if a federal official deems them necessary, or if the companies decide to drill.

The Interior Department lawyers also said they do not want to wait for a state review, because the companies' leases could expire in that time.

“The government would rather see the leases are in the hands of people who would be fastidious about lease development,” said Edward Geldermann, attorney for the Interior Department.

The leases let the companies work on exploration and development plans. They do not let the companies drill.

Lawyers for the state and environmental groups argued there is no guarantee they will get a chance to look at the exploration plans – and that it's easiest to do the review at the beginning, rather than after oil companies have spent money to develop their plans.

They also said environmental conditions have changed since the state was last able to review the leases, some of which are more than 30 years old.

The state also maintains it has not been able to review the leases to see if they are compatible with its coastal protection guidelines for offshore oil exploration and production.

“The state is very concerned with protecting its coastal property,” said Jamee Jordan Patterson, deputy attorney general for California. “There is no assurance that there will be no effects.”

Off the coast of California, there are already 23 oil and gas platforms, massive metal structures visible from the shore, and almost 900 wells drilled for oil extraction.

Since the leases have been granted, California has set up two marine sanctuaries and numerous creatures, including the southern sea otter, have gone on the endangered species list.

The area has been sensitive to oil drilling since the state's largest offshore oil spill blackened the waters in the Santa Barbara Channel in 1969. Then, about 3.3 million gallons spilled from a platform, spawning an anti-drilling movement.

The 36 leases that the federal government granted are in the Santa Barbara area, from northern Ventura County to southern San Luis Obispo County. The tourism-heavy areas rely on their shores to attract vacationers. No new leases are being granted.

Typically, the exploration leases are granted for five to 10 years, and the companies then seek permission to begin to extract oil. The oil in the area is not of very good quality, and would primarily be used in asphalt production.

Wilkin did not say when she would issue a ruling.

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