

Testimony of Kerry and Mark Marhefka

Virtual Forum: *The Threat of Offshore Drilling and the Need for a Permanent Federal Ban*

House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources

October 14th, 2020

Mark Marhefka

Good afternoon, my name is Mark Marhefka and I am a second-generation commercial fisherman off the South Atlantic coast. My wife Kerry and I own Abundant Seafood in the Charleston, South Carolina area. Our company catches and sells sustainably harvested seafood to restaurants throughout the southeast, through our retail market and through a community supported fishery program. I have been making a living as a hook and line fisherman for forty-one years. I have spent my career dedicated to ensuring that there could be many generations of commercial fisherman to come after me ,and with the understanding that the fish I harvest is resource that is owned by all Americans. I simply catch it for those who can't go and catch it themselves.

One of the things I have been most proud of is how hard myself and other commercial fishermen have worked to build sustainable fisheries the South Atlantic. I have been integral in establishing many marine protected areas off our coast that protect the spawning grounds of our most vulnerable fish species like deepwater groupers. We have been working hard for years now on rebuilding our fish stocks, taking quota cuts and enacting seasonal spawning closures. I am disheartened to think that all of the sacrifices we have made to ensure a healthy living ecosystem in our oceans could be ruined with oil and gas exploration and drilling. My fellow fishermen in the Gulf are still feeling the negative effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill a decade later and I see that the risks associated with drilling are not worth the costs. It is estimated that there may be 4.7 billion barrels of oil on the Atlantic outer continental shelf and when you look at that number in relation to what Americans use in a year it is likely that the oil off South Carolina will meet

supply our needs for six days.¹ This seems like a huge risk to take for such a relatively small amount of oil.

We need permanent legislation to ban exploration and drilling off the Atlantic coast now. My livelihood and the livelihoods of many other hardworking watermen and women and the natural resources that feed our country are worth more than the oil that could potentially be found off our coast.

Kerry Marhefka

Good Afternoon Committee Members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this important issue. My name is Kerry Marhefka, Mark's wife and co-owner of Abundant Seafood. I am also a former fishery biologist and current member of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Though today I speak solely as a private citizen and not on behalf of the Council, the remarks I make here are informed by my experience as scientist and a fishery manager.

I am here today to implore Congress to finally take the action of permanently banning drilling for oil and natural gas off the Atlantic coast. We cannot rely on the whims of any given administration to protect our environment and our livelihoods. An oil spill off our coast would be an environmental disaster like never we have seen. According to The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) 90% of waters off South Carolina that were proposed in the Department of Interior's last Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Draft Program are designated as essential fish habitat². NOAA ranks the South Atlantic as having the highest relative environmental sensitivity to spilled oil. Additionally, oil spilled would have a high likelihood of being picked up by the fast moving current of the Gulf Stream which would in essence act like a "high velocity pump"³ spreading the spill along the entire Atlantic coast.

¹ <https://www.coastalconservationleague.org/offshore-drilling/>

² (<https://coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/stories/offshore-drilling.html>)

³ https://www.postandcourier.com/news/special_reports/if-oil-spilled-off-sc-s-coast-a-huge-current/article_9e1e534c-9fce-11e8-887d-63b1602d3df9.html

Even if drilling never occurs the exploration for oil and natural gas deposits alone will be incredibly harmful to the species we rely on to make a living. In 2017 five permits were issued to allow seismic air gun blasting as close as 3 miles off the South Carolina coast⁴. Seismic testing involves blasting the seafloor with high-powered airguns (a kind of powerful horn) every 10 seconds and measuring the echoes with long tubes to map offshore oil and gas reserves — in the process disturbing, injuring and killing marine mammals and other wildlife around the clock for years on end⁵. Fish catches have been shown to greatly decrease in areas where seismic airgun testing has occurred and it scares me to think of what this testing could do to our ability to catch fish and make a living.

It is time for a permanent ban on drilling for oil and gas off the Atlantic. Our coastal resources and communities are too important to risk.

⁴ <https://scelp.org/projects/view/126>

⁵ https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/seismic_blasting/index.html