



US Congress members oppose oil drilling in the Bahamas

Local environmentalists urge gov't to heed strong concerns expressed by representatives the country's most important trading partner and strategic ally

The local conservation community is urging the government of the Bahamas to pay heed to the strong concerns expressed by 16 members of Congress and reject a proposal for oil drilling just miles off the US coast.

Bahamian environmentalists have been sounding the alarm for years over the Bahamas Petroleum Company's (BPC) plan to drill exploratory wells in the pristine waters to the south and west of Andros Island, and are extremely grateful to the US legislators who have echoed their concerns.

"We are heartened and encouraged by the strong stance taken by congressmen against oil drilling in the Bahamas, said Waterkeeper Bahamas executive director Rashema Ingraham. "The United States is by far the most important trading partner and strategic ally for the Bahamas, and it would be highly irresponsible for our government to ignore their valid concerns.

"This BPC proposal is not only a critical threat to our precious marine environment, it is also a potential foreign relations catastrophe for this country. Oil drilling would endanger the entire east coast of the United States, a nation still feeling the effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster a decade ago.

"Our tourism industry is currently being held hostage by the global Covid-19 pandemic and thousands of Bahamians are out of work. We must do all we can to preserve our good relationship with the United States as the Bahamas seeks to recover from the grave economic fallout. Now is not the time to anger our closest friends."

Florida representatives Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, wrote a bipartisan letter to Secretary Michael Pompeo and the Chargé d' Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Nassau, requesting that the State Department ask the Bahamian government to discontinue efforts to approve offshore drilling in Bahamian waters near the U.S. Atlantic Coast. They were joined by 14 other representatives up and down the US Atlantic coast.

"The United States cannot afford another Deepwater Horizon disaster," the letter said. "This bipartisan group of Members respects the sovereignty of The Bahamas, but a spill in Bahamian waters could bring ruin to both of our countries' shorelines. Ten years after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, we call on Secretary Pompeo to urge the Bahamian government to reconsider its efforts to green-light dirty offshore oil drilling in a region so full of magnificent ecosystems and so dependent on international tourism."

Save The Bays chairman Joseph Darville said: "Congress has thankfully acknowledged what we have been saying from the beginning. The environmental risks of this ill-conceived plan are astronomical and the fallout from an accident would be absolutely devastating – not just for the Bahamas, but also for our valued strategic partner to the north.

"The dangers far outweigh any conceivable potential benefit. Congress members are absolutely justified in heeding the lessons of history. Even under the best possible conditions oil drilling is extremely hazardous; whereas in the Bahamas, we do not have an adequate regulatory regime to govern this industry, nor the resources to mitigate a massive spill. The United States came to our aid in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian

at considerable cost to the Federal government and risk to US Coast Guard personnel. It is our turn to be good neighbours and reciprocate that generosity of spirit.”

Casuarina McKinney-Lambert: ”No progress has been made to reduce the dangers of off-shore oil drilling since the Deepwater Horizon disaster took place 10 years ago that spilled more than 200 million gallons of oil. As a result of that oil spill, the US seafood industry lost nearly \$1 billion, and the recreation industry lost more than \$500 million. The US is still feeling the repercussions a decade later.

“As a country dependent on tourism and fisheries, the Bahamas cannot the afford the risk to our country that oil drilling in our waters would pose. Having gone through Hurricane Dorian and now experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, we can't afford the risk of another massive setback.”

Save The Bays legal director Fred Smith, QC, noted that successive Bahamas governments have failed to effectively oversee the implementation of environmental protection laws.

“For instance, the Planning and Subdivision Act and the Conservation and Protection of the Physical Landscape Act are routinely ignored by legislators in giving the green light to industrial projects. Why would anyone assume that in regard to oil exploration, they will suddenly become responsible stewards of the environment?

“Having laws and enforcing those laws are two completely different matters and the Bahamas has shown itself to be in capable of systematically ensuring that some of the very good laws passed by Parliament are administered. We still don't have a Freedom of Information Act so we don't know what permits have or have not been issued, under what circumstances, and there was no consultation. These are fundamental underpinnings for transparency demanded by civil society for decades now.”

Waterkeeper Bahamas' Rashema Ingraham added that the Bahamas Environment Science and Technology (BEST) commission which advises the government, had raised concerns in the past and asked BPC to give more information regarding its environmental protection protocols, but it is unclear if this was ever complied with.

The environmental community called on the government of the Bahamas to respond to the Congress members' letter promptly and to immediately revoke the exploratory license granted to BPC.

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