

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-60](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Offshore seismic surveys provide federal agencies and other entities with a wide range of data, from research on fault zones to geology that may indicate the presence of oil and gas. Companies seeking to conduct such surveys to find oil and gas resources in the OCS must obtain a permit from BOEM—which oversees offshore oil and gas activities. Man-made sources of ocean noise, such as seismic surveys, may harm marine mammals. Entities whose activities may cause the taking of marine mammals, which includes harassing or injuring an animal, may obtain incidental take authorizations for seismic surveys from NMFS or FWS, depending on the potentially affected species.

GAO was asked to provide information on the seismic permitting process. This report examines (1) BOEM's review process, the number of permit applications reviewed from 2011 through 2016, and its review time frames; and (2) NMFS's and FWS's review process, the number of incidental take authorization applications reviewed from 2011 through 2016, and their review time frames, among other objectives. GAO reviewed laws and regulations and agency documents, analyzed data on applications to BOEM, NMFS, and FWS, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that both NMFS and FWS develop guidance clarifying how and when staff should record review dates of incidental take authorization applications and analyze how long the reviews take. NMFS agreed and FWS partially agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-18-60](#). For more information, contact Frank Rusco at (202) 512-3841 or RuscoF@gao.gov.

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OFFSHORE SEISMIC SURVEYS

Additional Guidance Needed to Help Ensure Timely Reviews

What GAO Found

The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's (BOEM) process and time frames for reviewing seismic survey applications differ by region along the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS). From 2011 through 2016, BOEM reviewed 297 applications and issued 264 seismic survey permits, and the reviews' time frames differed by region (see table). As part of the process, BOEM may require approved "incidental take" authorizations from the Department of Commerce's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) or Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), given the possibility such surveys may disturb or injure marine mammals. BOEM does not have statutory review time frame requirements for issuing permits, and officials said the agency starts its formal review once it determines that an application is complete. In some cases, the agency issued a permit on the same day it determined an application was complete.

BOEM's Seismic Survey Permits Issued from 2011 through 2016

OCS region	Permits issued	How many days review took
Alaska	8	35-200
Atlantic	6	0-340
Gulf of Mexico	250	0-287

Source: GAO analysis of BOEM data. | GAO-18-60

NMFS and FWS follow a similar general process for reviewing incidental take authorization applications related to seismic survey activities. From 2011 through 2016, NMFS and FWS reviewed 35 and approved 28 such applications across the three OCS regions, including some authorizations related to BOEM permits as well as research seismic surveys not associated with BOEM permits. NMFS was unable to provide accurate data for the dates the agency determines an application is adequate and complete—and FWS does not record this date. For example, based on GAO's review of NMFS data, in at least two cases, the date NMFS recorded the application had been determined adequate and complete was after the date when the proposed authorization was published in the *Federal Register*. Federal internal control standards call for agencies to use quality information. Without guidance on how to accurately record review dates, agencies and applicants will continue to have uncertainty around review time frames. Further, under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the agencies are to review one type of incidental take authorization application—incidental harassment authorization applications—within 120 days of receiving an application for such authorizations. NMFS and FWS have not conducted an analysis of their review time frames. Not conducting such an analysis is inconsistent with federal internal control standards that call for agency management to design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks. Without analyzing the review time frames for incidental harassment authorization applications and comparing them to statutory review time frames, NMFS and FWS are unable to determine whether they are meeting their objectives to complete reviews in the 120-day statutory time frame.