

# Trump administration to ease offshore drilling rules

*The Associated Press*

NEW ORLEANS — The Trump administration is easing rules imposed on offshore oil and gas drilling six years after the nation's worst offshore oil spill.

The decision won immediate praise from an offshore drilling group, but environmentalists said it would increase the risk of future disasters.

The changes, which will take effect Dec. 27, come as the administration seeks to expand offshore drilling into areas where it is currently banned and has scrapped an Obama-era policy to protect oceans and the Great Lakes, replacing it with one emphasizing economic growth.

A 48-page notice from the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement published Friday in the Federal Register says the agency “has become aware that certain provisions in that rulemaking created potentially unduly burdensome requirements for oil and natural gas production operators ... without meaningfully increasing safety of the workers or protection of the environment.”

An offshore drilling industry group said it's a positive step.

“The revisions develop a rule that reduces unnecessary burdens placed on industry, while still maintaining world-class safety and environmental protections. We have a rule that is not a safety rollback, but instead incorporates modern technological advances,” Randall Luthi, president of the National Ocean Industries Association, said in a news release.

The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, said the changes raise the risk of more deadly accidents like the one that killed 11 men on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in 2010 and spewed an estimated 134 million gallons of oil into waters off Louisiana.

The group objected most strongly to dropping a requirement for third-party inspections of offshore drilling safety equipment — something oceans program director Miyoko Sakashita called one of the biggest recommendations resulting from the Deepwater Horizon spill.

The new rules replace that with design testing and documentation by the operator, with independent review and certification if a device is moved to a different location.

“In a time when there is this tremendous push to expand offshore oil and gas drilling, if anything we need to be tightening up regulations and making it safer rather than rolling back regulations for industry safety,” she said in a phone interview.

“We've seen in the past that just allowing the industry to regulate itself is not an effective way to prevent oil spills and protect the safety of workers,” she continued. “So it's important to have the third-party oversight.”

The federal agency, often referred to by the initials BSEE, said it is keeping “multiple layers of review to ensure safety and environmental protection in the design, installation and testing” of safety systems.

“BSEE expects those procedural changes will continue to ensure safety and environmental protection, especially because of the other, more substantive, regulatory requirements applicable to safety equipment

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design, function, maintenance, and testing that are being retained or enhanced,” it said in a response to comments made to its original proposal last year.

The agency said those include requiring most types of safety and pollution prevention equipment to be independently “design-tested” against detailed testing criteria, and requiring such equipment to be made and marked under a quality assurance program meeting standards approved by the agency.