

# **Finding of No Significant Impact**

Environmental Assessment  
Expression of Interest #1838  
ES-020-2015-12

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA), ES-02-2015-12, to address the anticipated environmental effects of offering one lease parcel in St. Helena Parish, Louisiana at the March 2016 BLM Eastern States Competitive Oil and Gas Lease Sale (March Lease Sale). The proposed lease parcel includes 32.21 acres of privately owned surface estate and Federal minerals administered by the BLM. Standard terms and conditions as well as parcel-specific stipulations have been attached to the parcel as proposed in the EA. In addition to the Proposed Action, a No Action Alternative was analyzed in the EA.

## **EXTERNAL SCOPING**

The BLM was not required to consult with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for this Proposed Action since there are no threatened or endangered species in St. Helena Parish, Louisiana. The BLM did consult with the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) on March 3, 2015 and a concurrence letter for the Proposed Action was received on April 13, 2015. Additionally, letters were sent to various tribes on March 6, 2015. Comments were received from two tribes and they did not indicate any concerns about historical sites that may be present. The tribes did, however, request that the area be surveyed once the development plan was known and the survey be sent to the tribes. A 30-day review period is provided for public review and comment on the EA prior to the proposed lease sale.

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

Based upon a review of the EA and its supporting documents, I have determined that the Proposed Action is not a major Federal action, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individual or cumulatively, with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27.

This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described:

### **Context:**

The Proposed Action would occur in St. Helena Parish, Louisiana in the East Gulf Coastal Plain Ecoregion. The project includes privately owned surface estate involving federally administered mineral estate that by itself does not have known or identified international, national, regional, or state-wide importance. The proposed lease would give the lessee exclusive rights to explore and

develop oil and gas reserves on the lease, but does not in itself authorize surface disturbing activities. Although there is no surface disturbance at this stage, the EA analyzes a reasonably foreseeable development scenario (RFD) to assess potential future effects from drilling that may occur later at the application for permit to drill (APD) stage. Additional site-specific National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis will be conducted at that time, should federal minerals be proposed for development.

The parcel being offered for sale is part of a larger 960 acre production unit and adjacent lands are all privately owned with private mineral estate. Because the parcel is part of a larger unit, the RFD scenario projects that any surface disturbance associated with development of the federal minerals would most likely occur on the adjacent private lands, not on the lease parcel itself. The Federal minerals, if proposed for development in the future, would most likely be accessed by a lateral line from wellpads constructed on the adjacent private lands.

Current oil and gas development in St. Helena Parish includes two pre-production wells within 2.8 miles of the proposed lease parcel and seven producing wells approximately 8 miles to the west. The proposed lease parcel is adjacent to the proposed Day-Branch Field, which is over 1,000 acres in extent for drilling and production of Tuscaloosa Marine Shale (State of Louisiana Office of Conservation, Order No. 1578). The 32.21 acres of federal mineral estate could potentially add two additional surface wells on adjacent lands if the parcel is leased and developed. Additionally there are 23 Tuscaloosa Marine Shale units in varying phases of proposal in development in northern St. Helena Parish, and encompassing 24,329 acres (Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, Sonris GIS, accessed December 2015). If the proposed EOI were approved, it could contribute less than one percent of surface disturbance within the Tuscaloosa Marine Shale units.

#### **Intensity:**

The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and incorporated into resources and issues considered (includes supplemental authorities Appendix 1 H-1790-1) and supplemental Instruction Memorandum, Acts, regulations and Executive Orders. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

#### **1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.**

The Proposed Action may affect resources as described in the EA. There are no direct impacts to resources from the act of leasing. The EA identifies potential impacts to lands adjacent to the lease parcel as a result of potential future impacts from reasonably foreseeable future development to air resources, fish and wildlife, geology/mineral resources/energy production, soils, vegetation, invasive species, water resources, wastes, recreation, and cultural resources, visual resources, socioeconomics and environmental justice. Potential future best management practices, standard operating procedures, and mitigating measures to reduce impacts to the various resources were identified in the EA. None of the direct, indirect, or cumulative

environmental effects discussed in detail in the EA are considered significant. This area is not covered by a BLM Resource Management Plan, however, in accordance with 43 CFR 1610.8(b)(1), the EA serves as the basis for making a decision on this Proposed Action.

**2. The degree to which the Proposed Action affects public health or safety.**

The Proposed Action would offer a lease parcel for sale and would not directly affect public health or safety. Public health or safety would also not be adversely affected as a result of potential future development. The parcel is part of a larger production unit that has yet to be developed. Further development of the larger unit may or may not involve drilling into the federal minerals. If the parcel is subsequently sold and the lease enters into a development stage, public health or safety would be further addressed through site-specific NEPA analysis where specific mitigation measures to protect public health and safety, such as controlling the potential for spills or wastes would be identified as deemed necessary and appropriate.

**3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.**

The EA evaluated the area of the Proposed Action and determined that no unique geographic characteristics including Wild and Scenic Rivers, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Designated Wilderness areas, Wilderness Study Areas, Wetlands, Park Lands, or Ecologically Critical Areas were Present. The parcel is 90% cleared and contains a dirt road running east/west through the center of the tract. One of the soil types located on and in the vicinity of the parcel is considered prime farmland, but the amount of potential future disturbance projected under the RFD scenario is only 16 acres. Although the area has not been surveyed for cultural resources, a literature search did not reveal any historic resources present on or near the site. Further review will be conducted at the APD stage if the Federal minerals are proposed for development. Impacts from potential future development would be controlled through the use of best management practices and stipulations.

**4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be controversial.**

Effects on the quality of the human environment are not expected to be significant or highly controversial. Site-specific NEPA will be conducted that addresses specific effects on resources at the time of development. Controversy in this context is considered to be in terms of disagreement about the nature of the effect- not political controversy or expression of opposition to the action or preference among the alternatives analyzed within the EA. The public will have 30 days to review the EA and provide comments.

- 5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**

The project is not unique or unusual. The BLM has experience implementing similar actions in similar areas. The environmental effects to the human environment are fully analyzed in the EA. There are no predicted effects on the human environment that are considered to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

- 6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

This project neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. This leasing of Federal minerals and more specifically fluid minerals has been occurring since the creation of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920. A decision to lease would not limit later resource management decisions for areas open to development proposals, although lease stipulations do establish sideboards for future potential oil and gas development.

- 7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.**

The interdisciplinary teams preparing the EA evaluated the Proposed Action in context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. The cumulative impacts may result in a very small increase in greenhouse gas emissions but are not expected to result in climate change impacts because climate change is a global process that is affected by the total of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The incremental contribution to global greenhouse gases from the Proposed Action cannot be translated into effects on climate change globally or with the area of the lease parcels. Other minor cumulative effects could occur to natural resources such as water resources and vegetation from potential future development of the parcels in combination with other leasing activities, but significant cumulative effects are not expected. The use of best management practices and lease stipulations, as well as potential conditions of approval at the APD stage, would lessen the potential for cumulative effects.

- 8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.**

There are no known features within the project area listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) that would be adversely affected by a decision to offer for sale the subject parcels, or from potential future development. If leases enter into a development stage, NRHP resources would be further addressed through site-specific NEPA.

- 9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.**

No threatened or endangered species are located in St. Helena Parish, Louisiana.

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

The project does not violate any known Federal, State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. In addition, the project is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies and programs.

Bruce Dawson

Bruce Dawson, District Manager

Southeastern States District Office

2/24/2016

Date