

03/22/23 • [BIG ENERGY](#) › [VIEWS](#)

Spike in Whale and Dolphin Deaths Prompts Calls for Investigation Into Impact of Offshore Wind Projects on Marine Life

A sudden spike in whale and dolphin deaths along the East Coast has pitted local citizens and conservation groups against the Biden administration, Big Energy and “Big Green” environmental organizations and ignited a fierce debate about the effects of offshore wind development on wildlife and ocean ecosystems.

By [W. Aaron Vandiver](#)

Photo credit: [@Foolpro44614609/Twitter](#)

Miss a day, miss a lot. [Subscribe to The Defender's Top News of the Day. It's free.](#)

A sudden spike in whale and dolphin deaths along the East Coast has [pitted local citizens](#) and conservation groups against the Biden administration, Big Energy and “Big Green” environmental organizations and ignited a [fierce debate](#) about the effects of offshore wind development on wildlife and ocean ecosystems.

And according to [reports](#), New Jersey’s Marine Mammal Stranding Center (MMSC) tracked [23 stranded dolphins](#) along the state’s coast since January, including an unprecedented “mass stranding” of eight dolphins in Sea Isle City on Tuesday — the first “mass stranding” of such a large number of dolphins in New Jersey, the MMSC said.

Since early December, 13 dead whales have [washed up](#) on the New Jersey-New York shoreline, and 11 more have washed up elsewhere along the East Coast.

The deaths of whales and dolphins coincide with pre-construction work being conducted on numerous offshore wind projects in the area.

Advocates for the whales claim the pre-construction activities, which include sonar mapping by energy companies to survey the ocean floor, could be causing or contributing to whale deaths.

But backers of the wind projects deny that claim.

Cindy Zipf, executive director of the New Jersey-based [Clean Ocean Action](#), said the “unprecedented amount of whales dying here” coincides with “industrial activity taking place on a scale that has never before happened in these waters.”

“The only new activity in the ocean is the unprecedented concurrent industrial activity by over 11 companies in the region’s ocean,” Zipf said. “Why is this not being investigated? Why are these companies getting a pass?”

During a March 16 [Congressional hearing](#), Zipf testified about the need to investigate the noise created by offshore survey work, reiterating that Clean Ocean Action believes recent deaths of marine mammals “could be plausibly caused by the survey work,” including the cumulative impact of multiple survey vessels.

An Examination Into Offshore Wind Industrialization



Concerned citizens accused of spreading 'disinformation'

Most of the whale fatalities have been humpbacks. Necropsies revealed that some were hit by vessels, but the exact cause of the unusually high pace of recent deaths is not known.

In January, Clean Ocean Action sent President Biden a [detailed letter](#) requesting a halt to offshore development pending a comprehensive independent investigation.

New Jersey-based Save Long Beach Island also sent a [letter to Biden](#) detailing concerns about the noise levels generated by offshore survey vessels, and appealing to the president for a serious investigation.

And in February, a coalition of [New Jersey mayors](#) called on federal officials to halt offshore wind activities pending investigation.

"The unprecedented number of whale strandings coincides with ongoing activity from acoustic survey vessels for the development of offshore wind," the [mayors said](#).

New Jersey Senate Republicans in February proposed a [30-day moratorium](#) on wind farm survey work to determine if there is a link with the whale deaths, but the state's democratic lawmakers blocked the effort.

Federal officials also rebuffed requests for a temporary pause of offshore wind activities.

The National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA) claims on its website there is "[no evidence](#) to support speculation that noise" from wind development-related work is causing whale deaths and "no specific links between recent large whale mortalities and currently ongoing surveys for offshore wind development."

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the Marine Mammal Commission (MMC) issued similar statements.

Raising the stakes in the fight, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry in January said opposition to offshore wind energy is part of a "[disinformation campaign](#)."

"It's just a [cynical disinformation campaign](#)," Greenpeace Oceans Director John Hocevar said in mid-February — though less than two weeks earlier, Greenpeace issued a [statement](#) saying "It's too early to tell what's causing all of these deaths" (Greenpeace did not respond to a request for comment).

Energy companies "have influential allies in their corner beyond the White House," [The Washington Post reported](#). "The Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and other major environmental groups are working to push the projects forward."

These "Big Green" groups emphasized that the biggest known threats to whales are plastic garbage, ship strikes, fishing gear and climate change. They've repeatedly claimed there is "no evidence" the recent whale deaths were caused by offshore wind development.

Greenpeace and other groups [pointed out](#) that NOAA has tallied 178 whale deaths off the East Coast in the last six years, attributing 40% of those deaths to fishing gear or vessel strikes.

These large environmental organizations call for ongoing studies but staunchly oppose a moratorium or a high-profile, immediate investigation that might slow down offshore wind development.

One of the best ways to help whales, Greenpeace said in its [recent statement](#), is to "stop our dependency on oil and gas."

The organization suggested the fossil-fuel industry is behind efforts to derail wind energy. While it does appear that some members of the [broad political coalition](#) opposing offshore wind are associated with that industry, not all of them are.

"The environmental groups that promote [the wind projects] are huge international groups," noted [Paul Kanitra](#), mayor of Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, in contrast with "local environmental groups [that] have major concerns about this."

Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, is taking sides, too. The social media giant started [flagging posts](#) that suggest a connection between wind farms and whale deaths "as part of Meta's efforts to combat false news and misinformation."

Why are officials so dismissive of concerns about whales? Why are environmental groups whose mission traditionally has been to protect whales and the oceans so hostile to a pause to enable an investigation?

And why is the loaded term "disinformation" suddenly being trotted out?

Big Oil stands to make 'tens of billions' off fast-tracking of wind projects

A careful analysis reveals the Biden administration, [Big Energy](#) and Big Green are determined to "fast track" offshore wind development as part of an effort to address climate change, even at the risk of immediate harm to whales and ocean ecosystems.

Big Energy companies stand to make [tens of billions](#) of dollars from this "fast-tracked" process — a powerful incentive to use every available tactic to deflect attention away from wind development toward other potential causes of whale mortality, to prevent or delay a real investigation while claiming there is "no evidence" of harm and to slam anyone standing in the way as spreaders of "disinformation."

Meanwhile, politicians and climate activists can claim they are doing what is necessary to save the planet by promoting the fast-tracking of offshore wind projects.

The Biden administration last year [auctioned offshore wind development rights](#) to more than 488,000 acres off the coast of New Jersey and New York.

The auction drew \$4.37 billion in bids from large energy companies including BP, Shell, Duke Energy and Equinor (formerly Statoil, a Norway state-owned energy company).

These huge multinational corporations plan to spend billions more building “thousands of skyscraper-size turbines off America’s shores,” according to [The Washington Post](#).

Biden set a goal of obtaining [30 gigawatts of power from offshore wind](#) by 2030. About a dozen offshore wind projects in total are in some stage of development off the East Coast. [Millions of acres](#) are under consideration for offshore wind development.

Clean Ocean Action said all of this is “too much, too soon.” In its letter to Biden, the group said “[a]ll of the current proposed offshore wind projects off the NJ coast are listed in the federal ‘FAST-41’ program and have been given the green light for advancement.”

“FAST-41” is a regulatory framework that puts energy infrastructure projects on a “fast track.”

The letter also noted that federal authorities have entered into several agreements with wind energy developers that “aim to fast-track and advance offshore wind energy in the New York/New Jersey [area] and beyond.”

In January, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) announced new regulations designed to [fast-track offshore wind energy development](#) to an even greater extent.

The [new regulations](#) will save energy companies an estimated \$1 billion in compliance costs over a 20-year period, the agency said.

Referring to the agreements in its letter to Biden, Clean Ocean Action wrote:

“These federal agreements and initiatives designed to fast-track and streamline large projects essentially make it easier for private companies to control and develop our public resource: the ocean.

“Racing quickly and carelessly through these processes will prove devastating to marine life.”

Sound waves can penetrate 100 feet into sea floor

Sean Hayes, NOAA’s chief of protected species, last year sent [a letter](#) to BOEM’s lead biologist explaining that “[t]he development of offshore wind poses risks to these species [whales]” and that “these risks occur at varying stages including construction and development and include increased noise, vessel traffic, habitat modifications.”

In fact, wind energy companies have received a substantial number of “take authorizations” from regulators that allow them to “incidentally” harass marine mammals.

According to Clean Ocean Action, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued 11 active incidental [take authorizations](#) to energy companies, with six more pending, which collectively permit the “Level B” harassment of over 63,000 marine mammals.

Level B harassment is defined as activity that has the potential to disrupt behavioral patterns including migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding or sheltering.

In their applications for “take authorizations,” the energy companies describe their use of sonar mapping to conduct offshore survey work. Sonar mapping is known to disturb whales, acoustic species that are especially sensitive to noise, depending on factors such as the noise level and the distance from the source.

The sonar-mapping devices used on offshore wind survey vessels send out waves of sound that can penetrate about [100 feet into the sea floor](#).

According to Clean Ocean Action’s letter, “The geotechnical survey boats” for offshore wind projects “use sea-floor characterization through high-level focused pulses of low-frequency sound through vast areas of the ocean floor in the same frequency that whales hear and communicate.”

“Sonar can disorient [whales] or cause hearing impairments that could in turn lead to ship strikes,” the letter explains.

In fact, the sudden spike in dead whales since early December coincides with the sonar mapping conducted by offshore survey vessels of the wind energy companies.

Are energy companies underestimating sound levels?

According to Save Long Beach Island, public records indicate that approximately six survey vessels were operating in the area during December and January.

The organization’s president, Bob Stern, formerly worked in the office of environmental compliance at the U. S Department of Energy (DOE). He said some of the survey vessels operating in the area were carrying equipment capable of generating sound at levels that could disturb whales, causing them to be struck by ships.

Wind proponents, however, insist there is “no evidence” that the sonar mapping being done by survey vessels is harming whales.

A scientist with BOEM said that compared to high-energy seismic guns used in oil and gas exploration, the tools used to explore wind sites are “typically smaller in the [amount of acoustic energy](#) they put into the water column.”

Energy companies, government regulators and their backers in big environmental groups are moving forward on the assumption that these tools carry risk of harm to whales only at short distances — about 1/10 of a mile.

Marine scientist Doug Nowacek of Duke University, whose team won a [\\$7.5 million grant](#) from the DOE to study ways to “manage” the environmental impacts of offshore wind development, said [that to disturb a humpback](#), the survey vessel would have to be “basically right next” to the whale.

But Stern said he believes the wind energy companies may be underestimating the sound levels generated by the devices carried on their vessels. Even slight discrepancies could dramatically change the distances at which these sound-generating tools have a detrimental impact, according to Stern.

For example, the energy company Atlantic Shores filed a [harassment authorization application](#) indicating its vessels carry a device called the “[Dura Spark](#)” unit. The application says the device will generate 203 decibels (dB).

The company “assigned” this decibel level to the unit, and considers it a “realistic and conservative value.”