

September 8, 2020

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt  
Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement Director Scott Angelle  
Admiral Karl Schultz, Commandant of the Coast Guard  
Loren Sweatt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health

Dear Secretary Bernhardt, Director Angelle, Admiral Schultz and Deputy Asst. Secretary Sweatt:

We are writing to urgently request that the U.S. Department of Interior, U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration take action to address the potentially life-threatening living and working conditions for offshore and onshore oil and gas workers and nearby communities stemming from the novel COVID-19 virus.

The offshore oil industry presents a high risk for oil workers, as oil rig employees spend shifts working on site, sleeping and eating in tight quarters. Onshore oil and gas workers, particularly those living in “man camps” are also at risk from close contact on the job and in quarters. Nearby communities, particularly Indigenous peoples, low income populations, and communities of color are already at higher risk of suffering from COVID-19 and often have few healthcare resources. These impacts jeopardize lives, livelihoods, human health and human rights. It is incumbent on federal regulators to investigate whether oil and gas operators are sanitizing workspaces, evacuating workplaces when necessary and adopting strict safety protocols such as temperature checks and frequent COVID-19 testing.

Media reports have detailed a series of outbreaks among offshore workers. In May, Shell Oil was forced to airlift nine workers from a Gulf of Mexico rig for COVID-19 testing and treatment, with five workers testing positive.<sup>1</sup> Workers at a BP oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico have also tested positive.<sup>2</sup> “It’s scary,” one worker told NBC News.<sup>3</sup> “You’re in close confinement. It’s like a cruise ship except you’re not going anywhere.”

Internationally, Mexico’s state-owned oil producer Pemex has disclosed the deaths of 202 employees and five contractors from COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> In Norway, Neptune Energy stopped drilling at an offshore rig after two workers tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> On an Exxon platform in Equatorial Guinea, 30 workers tested positive, according to Reuters.<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, there were more than 1,400 confirmed coronavirus cases among offshore oil workers as of mid-July, July 10, and infections had spread to about 3% of workers in the sector.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.chron.com/business/energy/article/5-offshore-Shell-workers-airlifted-from-rig-after-15298683.php>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-alaska-oil/bp-oil-workers-in-gulf-of-mexico-and-alaska-test-positive-for-coronavirus-idUSKBN21J42M>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/oil-rig-workers-hit-one-two-coronavirus-plummeting-oil-prices-n1178751>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-15/covid-19-is-killing-oil-workers-at-unparalleled-pace-in-mexico>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oedigital.com/news/480678-neptune-energy-halts-drilling-op-in-norway-after-covid-19-cases-on-seadrill-rig>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-exxon-equatorialguine/thirty-workers-on-equatorial-guinea-offshore-oil-platform-test-positive-for-coronavirus-sources-idUSL5N2CF4QP>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/finance/topstories/brazils-offshore-oil-workers-chilled-by-coronavirus-outbreaks/ar-BB16FIDG>

These outbreaks put wider communities at risk. Outbreaks among oil and gas workers in Alberta's tar sands region were linked to COVID-19 across five Canadian provinces.<sup>8</sup> And an early outbreak of COVID-19 at a Total LNG facility in Mozambique has been implicated in introducing the pandemic to that country.<sup>9</sup>

Early and continued outbreaks in the industry worldwide are of serious concern because industry groups have actively advocated for the designation of oil and gas workers as "Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers";<sup>10</sup> and these workers have continued to travel both within and between countries throughout the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> In light of these travel patterns, the public needs accurate and timely information on COVID-19 outbreaks not only at onshore and offshore facilities in the United States, but also at offshore facilities worldwide that are owned or operated, in whole or in part, by companies also operating offshore facilities in the territory or Exclusive Economic Zone of the United States. Yet the Trump administration has failed to inform the public about the true extent of the problem in the United States.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the Trump administration considered shutting down Gulf of Mexico oil production this spring due to concerns about the pandemic, yet no action was taken.<sup>12</sup> In April, after disclosing that 26 offshore oil workers had tested positive, the U.S. Coast Guard stopped reporting on the number of infected workers, telling Argus Media that COVID-19 data reporting was the responsibility of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.<sup>13</sup> An industry official called the failure to report such data "short-sighted," arguing that the data would show a lack of widespread infections. These risks are compounded by EPA waivers from vital environmental and health standards granted to thousands of companies, including hundreds of oil, gas and petrochemical operators, at the express urging of the oil and gas industries.<sup>14</sup>

Given the well-documented COVID-19 risks faced by oil and gas industry workers and the communities with which they interact, we respectfully request that the Department of the Interior, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Department take the following actions, in coordination with the Centers for Disease Control and in compliance with all laws and regulations protecting the privacy of individuals' health information:

- Investigate and publicly report, at least monthly, on COVID-19 testing and infection rates at offshore and onshore oil and gas facilities located within the jurisdiction of the United

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<sup>8</sup> <https://theenergymix.com/2020/05/18/tar-sands-oil-sands-man-camp-drives-covid-19-spread-to-five-provinces/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-14/total-s-lng-project-is-mozambique-s-coronavirus-epicenter>;  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-total-mozambique/total-working-with-mozambique-to-manage-covid-19-cases-at-lng-site-idUSKBN21Z2CJ>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.iadc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/IADC-PESA-CISA\\_Letter-Webpage.pdf](https://www.iadc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/IADC-PESA-CISA_Letter-Webpage.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.iadc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Circular-Letter-No.4204-Add.13-Coronavirus-Covid-19-Recommendations-For-Governments-And-Relevant-National-Authorities...-Secretariat.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-discussed-shutting-oil-production-in-gulf-of-mexico-11585923887>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2098396-us-stops-reporting-on-covid19-on-offshore-rigs>

<sup>14</sup> <https://apnews.com/3bf753f9036e7d88f4746b1a36c1ddc4>

States as well as oil and gas facilities abroad that are owned or operated by companies with facilities in the jurisdiction of the United States;

- Require companies operating oil and gas facilities within the jurisdiction of the United States to develop and publish COVID-19 response plans for all offshore and onshore sites, detailing precautionary measures implemented to protect worker and community safety, mitigate hazards, minimize workplace exposure to COVID-19, minimize exposure of surrounding communities to COVID-19 infection by workers, track and report COVID-19 cases among workers (including regular testing protocols, where appropriate), specify back-to-work plans for exposed workers or those with confirmed infections, and train workers regarding COVID-19 prevention and response;
- Regularly monitor and publicly report on companies' implementation of their COVID-19 response plans.
- Clarify and tighten OSHA's Revised Enforcement Guidance for Recording Cases of COVID-19<sup>15</sup> to include a rebuttable presumption that where COVID-19 exposures are documented among two or more workers at any offshore oil or gas platform or industry associated "man camp", the exposures are "work-related" as defined by 29 CFR 1904.5.<sup>16</sup>
- Promulgate an Emergency Temporary Standard pursuant to Article 6(c) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act mandating that all industries, expressly including the oil, gas and petrochemical industries, effectively protect workers and surrounding communities from COVID-19.

Oil and gas industry workers and the public need to know the truth about how widespread COVID-19 is in the industry, and whether the government and industry actors are taking action to protect workers and the communities with which they interact from this deadly disease.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments  
Project CoffeeHouse  
Berks Gas Truth  
Better Path Coalition  
Big Bend Defense Coalition

Call to Action CO  
Catholic Network US  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Center for International Environmental Law  
Clean Energy Action

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.osha.gov/memos/2020-05-19/revised-enforcement-guidance-recording-cases-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1904/1904.5>

Clean Energy Now Texas

Climate Hawks Vote

Crude Accountability

Earth Action, Inc

Earthworks

Environment Texas

Food & Water Action

Friends of the Earth

Frack Free Colorado

FracTracker Alliance

GreenLatinos

Greenpeace USA

Healthy Gulf

Institute for Policy Studies Climate Policy Program

New Energy Economy

Oil Change International

Progressive Democrats of America

Project CoffeeHouse

Public Citizen

Rachel Carson Council

Rapid Shift

Responsible Drilling Alliance

Revolving Door Project

Rootskeeper

Sierra Club

Stand.earth

Texas Campaign for the Environment

The Climate Center

Union of Concerned Scientists

Western Values Project

WildEarth Guardians

350PDX

350 Seattle