

underway in the Alaska OCS Region since 1976, including studies in this area. The emphasis has been on geologic mapping, environmental characterization of biologically sensitive habitats, endangered whales and marine mammals, physical oceanography, ocean-circulation modeling, and ecological and socio-cultural effects of oil and gas activities.

The MMS has had two past sales in the Chukchi Sea area. In May 1998, Sale 109 was held and resulted in 350 leases being issued. In August 1991, Sale 126 was held and resulted in 28 leases being issued. There were four exploratory wells drilled, but all have been

permanently plugged and abandoned. All 378 leases have since been relinquished or have expired. For the Chukchi Sea Planning Area, it is estimated that undiscovered conventionally recoverable resources are 15.46 billion barrels of oil and 60.11 trillion cubic feet of gas. No lease sales have been held in the Hope Basin area. For the Hope Basin Planning Area, it is estimated that undiscovered conventionally recoverable resources are 0.09 billion barrels of oil and 3.38 trillion cubic feet of gas.

Information on the studies program, completed studies, and a program status report for continuing studies in this area

may be obtained from the Chief, Environmental Studies Section, Alaska OCS Region, by telephone request at (907) 271-6577, or by written request at the address stated under Description of Area. A request may also be made via the Alaska Region Web site at [akwebmaster@mms.gov](mailto:akwebmaster@mms.gov).

#### 7. Tentative Schedule

If MMS receives specific nominations from industry in response to this Call and decides to proceed with the pre-sale process, the following is a list of tentative milestone dates applicable to a Chukchi Sea/Hope Basin sale in 2004:

	Tentative process milestones for proposed 2004 Chukchi Sea/Hope Basin Sale
Call published/public outreach initiated .....	March 2003.
Comments due on Call .....	June 2003.
Decision whether to proceed/Area Identification .....	July 2003.
NEPA analysis .....	January 2004.
Consistency Determination/Proposed Notice of Sale .....	April 2004.
Governor's Comments due .....	June 2004.
Final Notice of Sale published .....	August 2004.
Sale .....	September 2004.

Dated: March 19, 2003.

**R.M. "Johnnie" Burton,**

*Director, Minerals Management Service.*

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## DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

### Minerals Management Service

#### Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), Alaska Region, Norton Basin

**AGENCY:** Minerals Management Service (MMS), Interior.

**ACTION:** Call for information and nominations (Call).

**SUMMARY:** The Secretary's decision to consider offering the Norton Basin planning area in the OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2002-2007 provides for an 18-month "special-interest" process beginning with publication of this Call. Based on the information and specific nominations received as a result of this Call, a decision will be made whether to proceed with a sale.

**DATES:** Nominations and comments on the Call must be received no later than 90 days after publication of this document in the **Federal Register**.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Please call Tom Warren at (907) 271-6691 in MMS's Alaska OCS Region.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The objective of this "special-interest" leasing option is to foster exploration in a high-cost frontier OCS area remote from oil and gas infrastructure without investment of the considerable time and effort required for holding a typical lease sale. The general approach is to query industry regarding the level of interest in proceeding with a sale in the Norton Basin where we would expect to offer focused areas of specific interest for exploration and to request nominations of such areas. However, we will proceed based on the comments and information we do receive. Norton Basin may contain quantities of natural gas, which might be used for western Alaska communities if economically feasible. Comments are also being requested from the general public on this special-interest leasing process, including the terms and conditions of a sale. The MMS will consider all comments and nominations in the decision on whether and where within the Norton Basin to proceed with leasing and on the terms and conditions of a lease sale proposal. A decision to offer a nominated area for leasing will be conditioned on an informal commitment from industry to explore the area leased within a specific time period.

This is the second Call issued for the Norton Basin for this 5-year program.

The first Call was published in the **Federal Register** on January 22, 2002. No interest was expressed; therefore, the process was stopped and deferred to this year. If no interest is expressed in response to this second Call, MMS will defer the sale for one year and reissue the Call the following year. This process will continue throughout the 5-year program until there is sufficient interest to proceed with the planning steps toward a sale. Only one round of lease issuance in Norton Basin would occur during this 5-year program.

This Call does not indicate a preliminary decision to lease in the area described below. If no interest is expressed, MMS will defer the sale for one year and reissue the Call the following year. If MMS decides to proceed with the sale process, MMS will make the final decision on the specific areas for possible leasing at a later date in the presale process and in compliance with the 5-year program and with applicable laws including all requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the OCS Lands Act (OCSLA). The MMS may adjust the dimensions of a nominated area after discussions with the nominating company(ies).