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Salazar Announces Regulations to Strengthen Drilling Safety, Reduce Risk of Human Error on Offshore Oil and Gas Operations

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of the Interior today announced two new rules that will help improve drilling safety by strengthening requirements for safety equipment, well control systems, and blowout prevention practices on offshore oil and gas operations, and improve workplace safety by reducing the risk of human error.

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“These new rules and the aggressive reform agenda we have undertaken are raising the bar for the oil and gas industry’s safety and environmental practices on the Outer Continental Shelf,” said Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, who announced the rules today in a speech at the Woodrow Wilson International Center. “Under these new rules, operators will need to comply with tougher requirements for everything from well design and cementing practices to blowout preventers and employee training. They will also need to develop comprehensive plans to manage risks and hazards at every step of the drilling process, so as to reduce the risk of human error.”

The Drilling Safety Rule and the Workplace Safety Rule join a host of reforms that the Department of the Interior has undertaken in the five months since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that touch every stage of the offshore planning, review, permitting, drilling, and development processes.

“These two rules are part of a broader series of reforms we are undertaking to reduce the risks of offshore energy operations,” said Michael R. Bromwich, director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEM). “We are substantially raising the standards for all offshore operators, and are doing it in an orderly and responsible way. We will continue to move forward with other changes and reforms in what will remain a dynamic regulatory environment. We owe the public nothing less.”

The Drilling Safety Rule, effective immediately upon publication, makes mandatory several requirements for the drilling process that were laid out in Secretary Salazar’s May 27th Safety Report to President Obama. The regulation prescribes proper cementing and casing practices and the appropriate use of drilling fluids in order to maintain well bore integrity, the first line of defense against a blowout. The regulation also strengthens oversight of mechanisms designed to shut off the flow of oil and gas, primarily the Blowout Preventer (BOP) and its components, including Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs), shear rams and pipe rams. Operators must also secure independent and expert reviews of their well design, construction and flow intervention mechanisms.

The Drilling Safety Rule is being issued under an emergency rule-making process. Director Bromwich said that BOEM will soon move forward with a standard rulemaking process that includes greater opportunity for public comment and that considers implementing additional recommendations of the Secretary’s May 27th Safety Report, such as the requirement that BOP’s have two sets of blind shear rams.

The second regulation, known as the Workplace Safety Rule, requires offshore operators to have clear programs in place to identify potential hazards when they drill, clear protocol for addressing those hazards, and strong procedures and risk-reduction strategies for all phases of activity, from well design and construction to operation, maintenance, and decommissioning.

The Workplace Safety Rule requires operators to have a Safety and Environmental Management System (SEMS), which is a comprehensive safety and environmental impact program designed to reduce human and organizational errors as the root cause of work-related accidents and offshore oil spills. The Workplace Safety Rule makes mandatory American Petroleum Institute (API) Recommended Practice 75, which was previously a voluntary program to identify, address and manage safety hazards and environmental impacts in their operations.

BOEM will undertake additional workplace safety reforms, such as requirements for independent third-party verification of operators’ SEMS programs, through an additional rulemaking process that BOEM will be launching soon.

For a fact sheet on the [Drilling Safety Rule](#), click here.

For a fact sheet on the [Workplace Safety Rule](#), click here.

A fact sheet on [recent offshore oil and gas reforms](#) can be found here.

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