Risks of Offshore Drilling in the Outer Banks, North Carolina

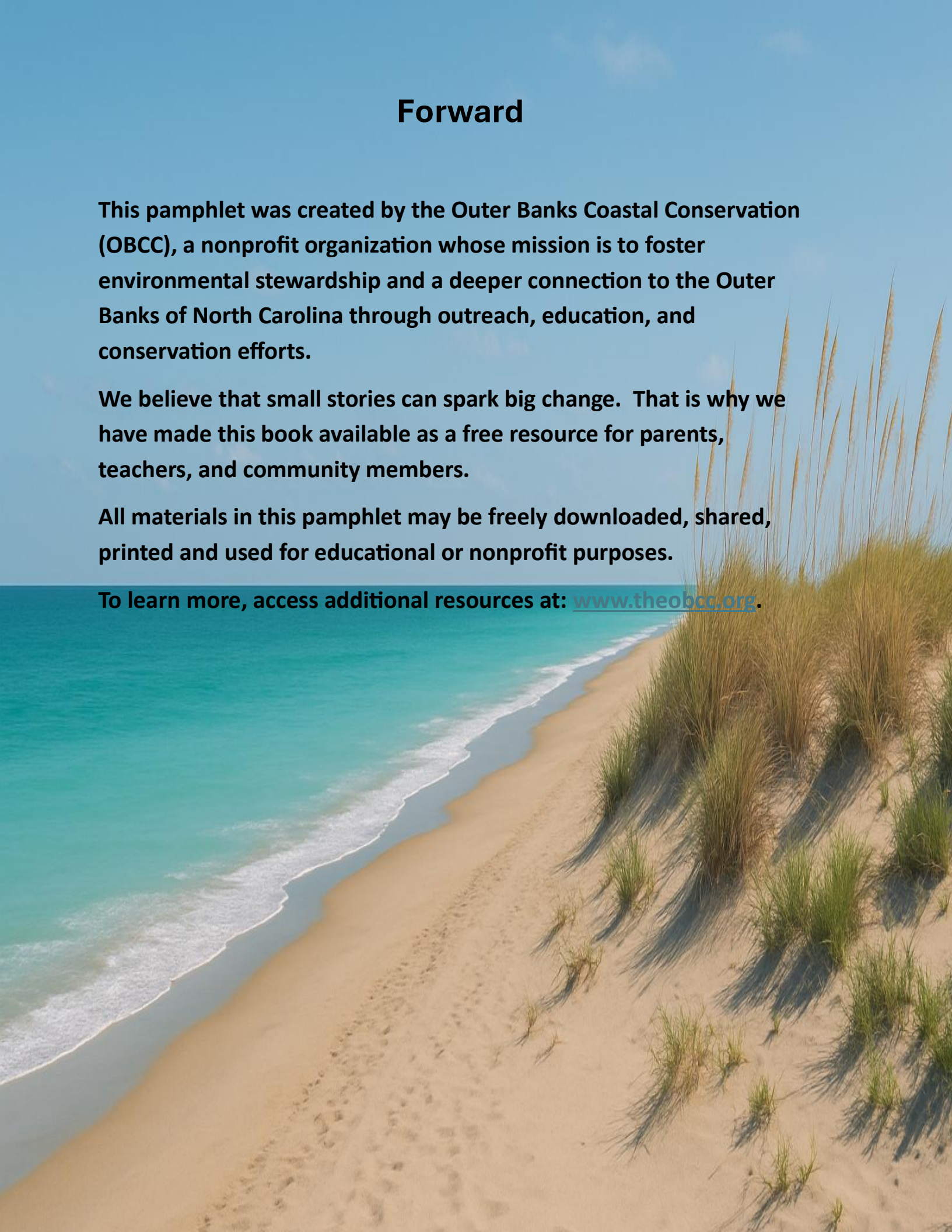
Forward

This pamphlet was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this pamphlet may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.



Why the Outer Banks are Uniquely Vulnerable

The Outer Banks of North Carolina are narrow, storm-exposed barrier islands edged by wildlife refuges and national seashore units. Any oil release—or even routine industrial activity—would interact with strong winds, shifting inlets, and longshore currents that drive oil and debris quickly onto beaches, marshes, and nursery habitats (e.g., Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Cape Hatteras National Seashore). Pea Island alone supports more than 365 bird species and threatened sea turtles, illustrating how sensitive these shorelines are to contamination. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

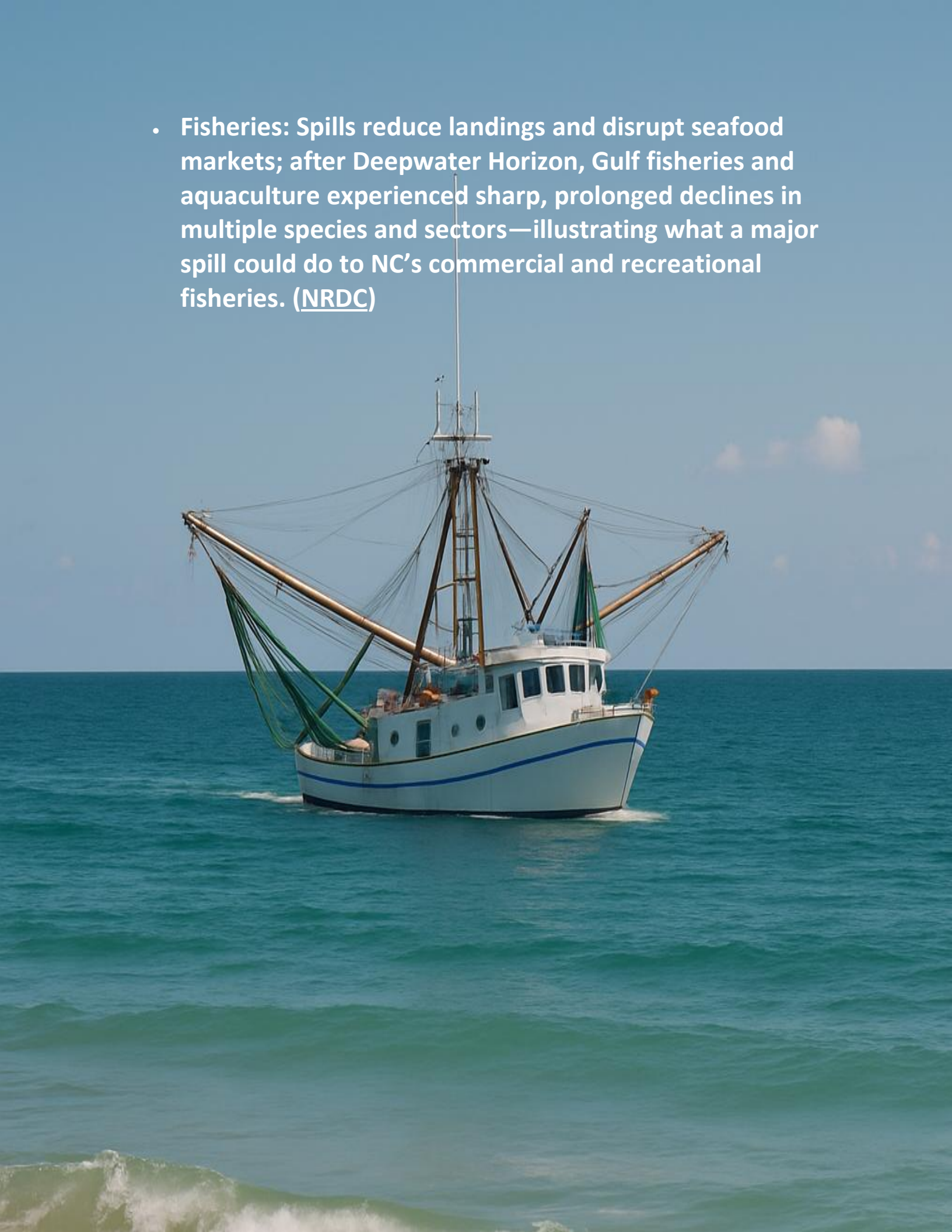
Environmental Risks

- **Spills & blowouts: Large spills (e.g., Deepwater Horizon) cause long-lived harm to fish, marine mammals, birds, oysters, and coastal vegetation, with cascading effects on food webs and habitat quality. National Academies syntheses and independent impact summaries document population-level injuries and persistent ecosystem damage. (National Academies Press)**
- **Chronic pollution: Routine operations (produced water discharges, drilling muds/cuttings, small leaks during transport) add hydrocarbons and metals to the marine environment, which can accumulate in sediments and biota—especially problematic for shallow shelf habitats common off NC. (Synthesis from Deepwater Horizon reviews.) (National Academies Press)**
- **Noise & seismic surveying: Seismic airgun surveys used to locate oil and gas elevate ocean noise over vast areas, degrading acoustic habitat for whales, dolphins, and fish that rely on sound to feed, mate, and navigate; federal filings and litigation materials describe exposure risks and mitigation limits. (NOAA Fisheries)**

Economic Risks to Coastal Communities

- **Tourism: The Outer Banks' economies are dominated by visitor spending; in 2023, tourism in Currituck, Dare, and Hyde counties generated roughly $2.7 billion and 15,500 jobs. Even the *perception* of risk can deter visitors and investors—something local leaders have emphasized in public comments. (content.ces.ncsu.edu)**

- **Fisheries: Spills reduce landings and disrupt seafood markets; after Deepwater Horizon, Gulf fisheries and aquaculture experienced sharp, prolonged declines in multiple species and sectors—illustrating what a major spill could do to NC's commercial and recreational fisheries. (NRDC)**



- **Property & cleanup costs: Highly eroding shorelines and frequent storm surf mean stranded oil and debris would repeatedly re-oil beaches and infrastructure, raising cleanup costs and lengthening closures. (Risk inference grounded in National Academies spill science and Outer Banks storm/erosion context.) (National Academies Press)**

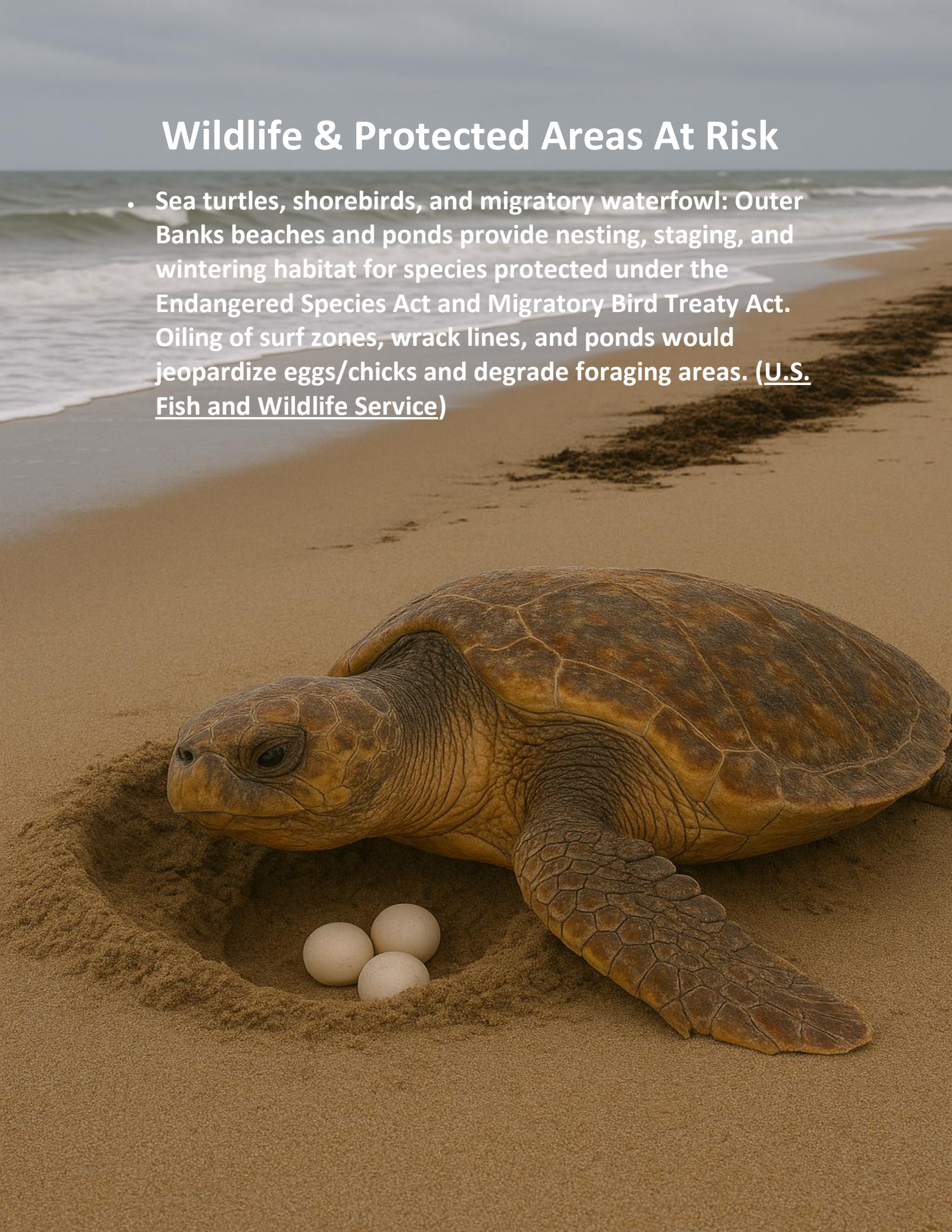
Emergency Response Challenges on the Outer Banks

- **Storm-prone operations: Hurricanes and nor’easters complicate both offshore safety and onshore response—damaging equipment, delaying containment, and spreading contamination. Recent storms causing rapid house collapses in Buxton illustrate how quickly high-energy surf can mobilize debris along this coast, a dynamic that would also transport oil and cleanup wastes. (The Washington Post)**

- **Access & supply chains: Single-corridor roads (NC-12) and ferry-dependent communities slow the movement of responders and equipment—especially during overwash and sound-side flooding.**

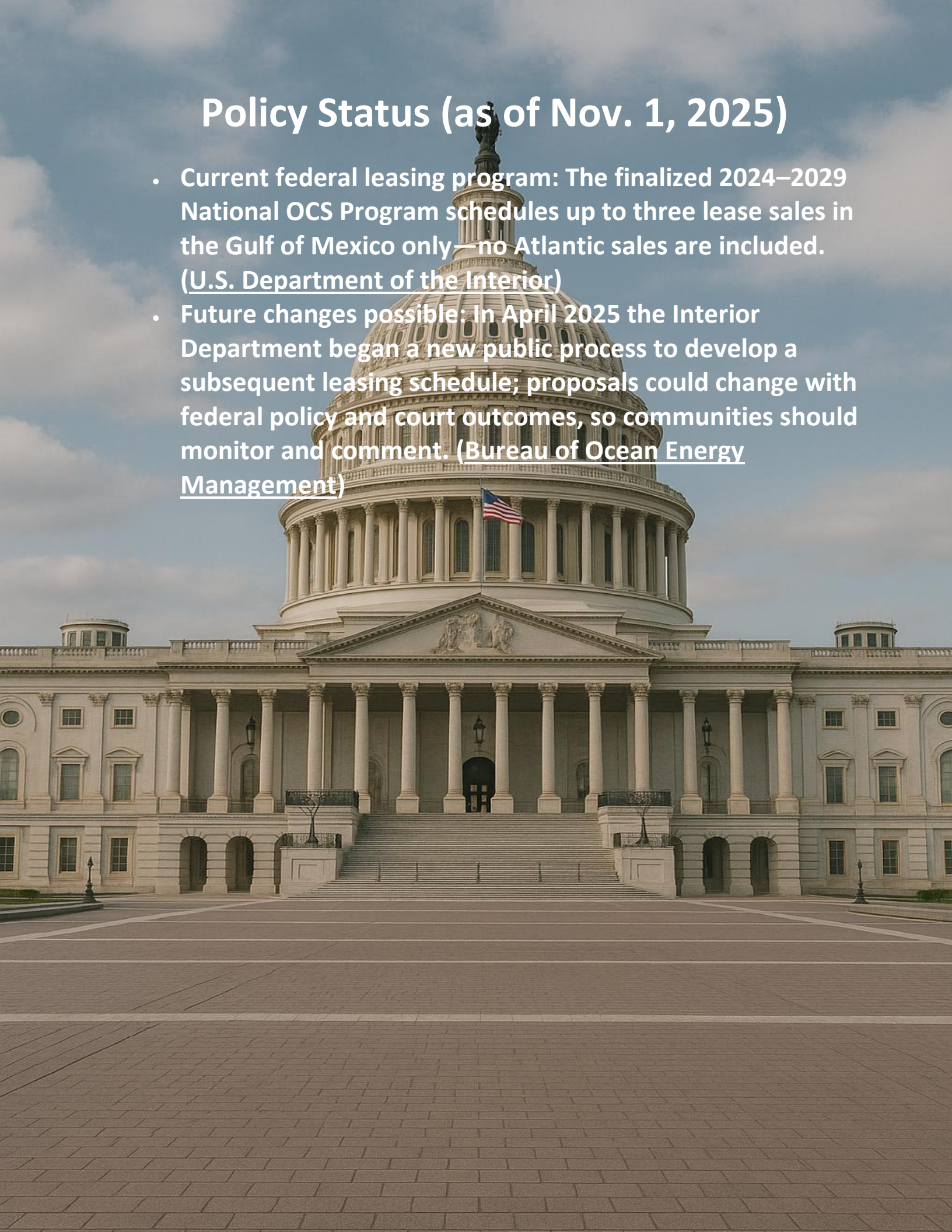
Wildlife & Protected Areas At Risk

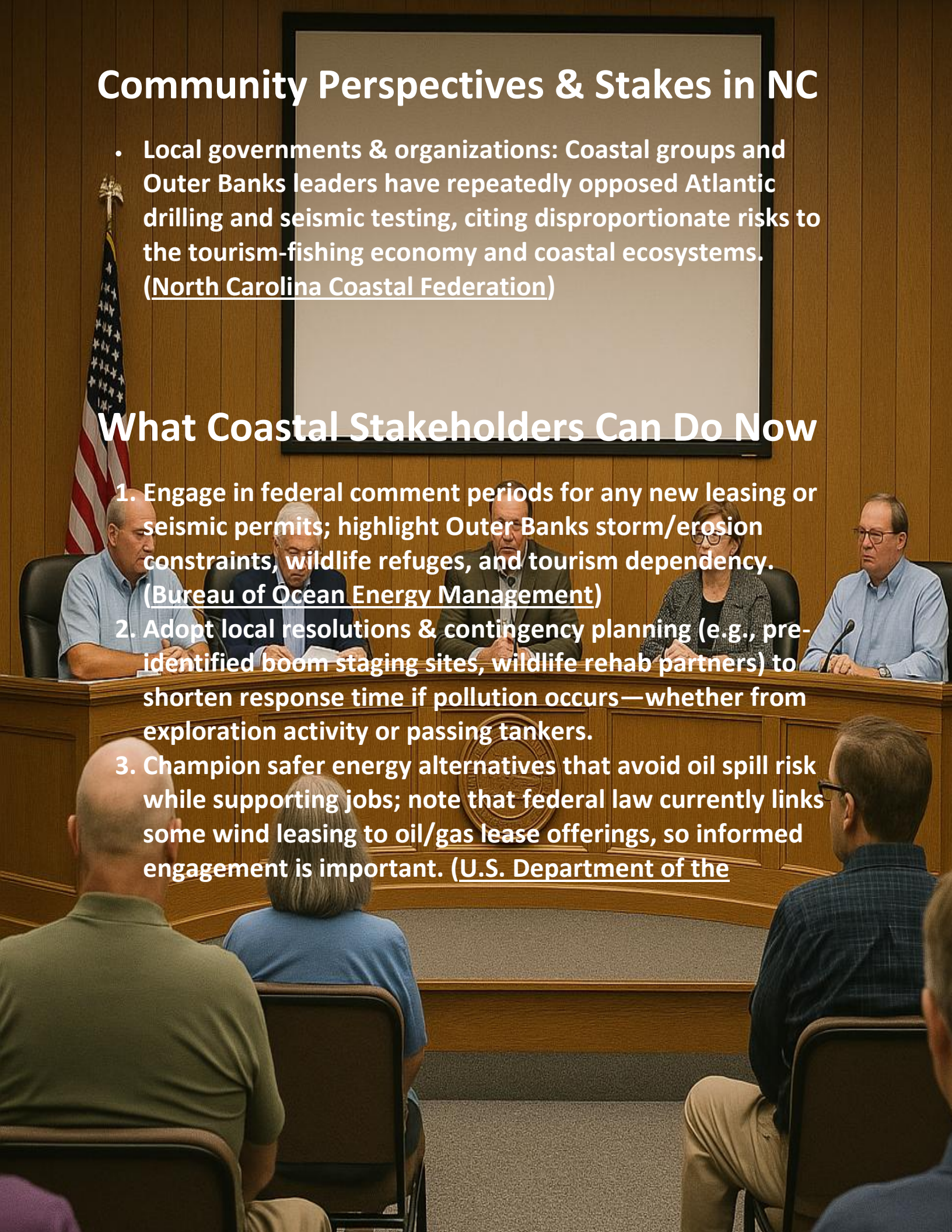
- **Sea turtles, shorebirds, and migratory waterfowl: Outer Banks beaches and ponds provide nesting, staging, and wintering habitat for species protected under the Endangered Species Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Oiling of surf zones, wrack lines, and ponds would jeopardize eggs/chicks and degrade foraging areas. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)**



Policy Status (as of Nov. 1, 2025)

- **Current federal leasing program: The finalized 2024–2029 National OCS Program schedules up to three lease sales in the Gulf of Mexico only—no Atlantic sales are included. (U.S. Department of the Interior)**
- **Future changes possible: In April 2025 the Interior Department began a new public process to develop a subsequent leasing schedule; proposals could change with federal policy and court outcomes, so communities should monitor and comment. (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management)**





Community Perspectives & Stakes in NC

- Local governments & organizations: Coastal groups and Outer Banks leaders have repeatedly opposed Atlantic drilling and seismic testing, citing disproportionate risks to the tourism-fishing economy and coastal ecosystems. (North Carolina Coastal Federation)

What Coastal Stakeholders Can Do Now

1. Engage in federal comment periods for any new leasing or seismic permits; highlight Outer Banks storm/erosion constraints, wildlife refuges, and tourism dependency. (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management)
2. Adopt local resolutions & contingency planning (e.g., pre-identified boom staging sites, wildlife rehab partners) to shorten response time if pollution occurs—whether from exploration activity or passing tankers.
3. Champion safer energy alternatives that avoid oil spill risk while supporting jobs; note that federal law currently links some wind leasing to oil/gas lease offerings, so informed engagement is important. (U.S. Department of the

Quick Frequently Asked Questions

- **Is drilling currently happening off the Outer Banks? No Atlantic lease sales are in the 2024–2029 program; however, federal policy can change—track BOEM updates and proposed programs. (U.S. Department of the Interior)**
- **Why worry if there's no leasing now? Because seismic permits and future programs can re-open the door; preparedness and public input shape outcomes, and a single spill could upend the Outer Banks' economy and wildlife. (Earthjustice)**

Did You Know?

- **The Outer Banks are home to over 365 bird species and several threatened sea turtle species—making them one of the most wildlife-rich coastlines in the eastern U.S.**
- **Sea turtle nests can be destroyed or contaminated when oil or debris washes into the wrack line or nesting dunes. Even trace oil residues can weaken hatchlings and disrupt their sense of direction.**
- **Shorebirds and migratory waterfowl depend on the Outer Banks beaches and ponds for feeding and resting during long migrations. Oiled feathers reduce insulation and flight ability, often leading to death from cold or starvation.**
- **After the Deepwater Horizon disaster, tens of thousands of birds, turtles, and fish were lost—proof that a single offshore accident can have region-wide impacts.**
- **The Outer Banks shape and currents make it especially vulnerable: oil spilled offshore could reach beaches and wetlands within hours, threatening habitats, tourism, and livelihoods.**

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