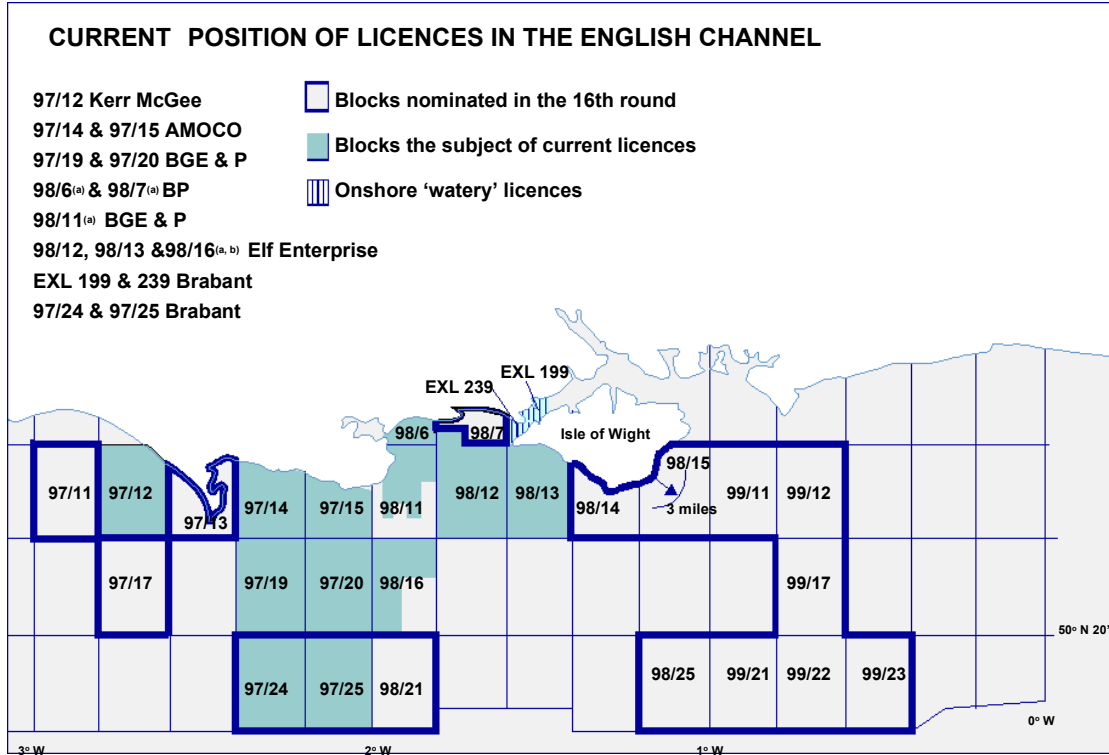


OIL AND GAS

Long-term aim: 'to resist oil or gas exploration within the Solent, unless it could be carried out with no harm to the established interests or the environment'.



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The Position

It is known that oil exists in the rock strata beneath the Solent, but the reserves are understood not to be commercially viable at the present time. Oil is vested in the Crown, and only those companies granted a licence through the Department of Trade and Industry have the right to carry out exploration and production. There are two systems of licensing for oil exploration: one for onshore, including 'bay closing areas' (such as the Solent and Southampton Water) and one for offshore.

In 1984, Shell UK Ltd was awarded a licence to search for oil and gas in the Solent. The company carried out seismic surveys and a series of environmental studies. They concluded that oil was not available in commercial quantities and the environmental constraints on exploration were too great. Two further licences have been issued in the western Solent to Brabant, and Elf Enterprise was granted licences to the west of the Isle of Wight. No progress has been made with these beyond seismic exploration and test drilling.

In the absence of planning controls in 'bay closing areas' and offshore, the Standing Conference on Oil and Gas Development in the English Channel (SCOG) was formed in 1979 to co-ordinate the views of local authorities. It covers the whole of the South Coast from Devon to West Sussex. It is recognised by government as the point of contact for local authority views on oil licensing, exploration and production.

In 1993, SCOG published its 'Policy Towards Offshore Exploration and Production', updating previous policies. Where drilling is proposed in estuaries and other sensitive inshore areas, such as the Solent, SCOG expects to be closely involved in assessing the likely risks and nuisances and in developing mitigation measures to reduce impacts on marine interests and users. In abbreviated form, the nine elements of SCOG policy are as follows.

The Standing Conference will:

1. normally support the exploration for offshore oil and gas reserves subject to proper environmental safeguards;
2. wish to be consulted on all proposals for exploration, appraisal or production licences;
3. expect all proposals for exploration, appraisal or production to be accompanied by a full environmental statement;
4. wish to be given advance notice of any offshore seismic work;
5. normally object to any drilling activity within one mile of the coast;
6. normally object to exploration drilling between one and three miles of the coast unless minimum criteria have been met to safeguard environmental, shipping, commercial, tourism and recreational interests;
7. normally object to appraisal drilling within three miles of the coast unless locational need can be demonstrated and the above criteria (policy 6) can be met;
8. require any development proposals to be supported by a full environmental statement;
9. normally object to development proposals within three miles of the coast involving major structures.

Clearly any proposals for oil exploration or extraction would cause considerable concern within the Solent, and the environmental constraints and possible conflicts with the intensive existing uses would be significant. It is difficult to conceive how such activity could take place within SCOG's criteria. However there is no issue at the present time, as no oil or gas exploration proposals are expected.

What do we need to do?

1. Keep a watching brief on oil and gas exploration proposals

In the absence of any particular issue at present, there is simply a need to keep a watching brief on future proposals. SCOG is the ideal organisation to achieve this.

LEAD ROLE: SCOG.

KEY ORGANISATIONS: OIL AND GAS

Department of Trade and Industry

Standing Conference on Oil and Gas Development in the English Channel (SCOG)

Oil companies.