

Coastal Drilling in Sunny California

Edward I. Maxwell



“Drill, baby, drill!”

Some Americans across the United States are demanding increased onshore and offshore drilling for oil and natural gas. Feeling pressure at the gas pump, households are hoping some relief will come from developing the energy resources within the United States.

These hopes have led to significant growth within the green, or environmentally friendly, energy industry—wind power and solar power companies have popped up all over the country. However, government and corporate initiatives to increase U.S. energy production have also included more traditional energy resources. Developing offshore oil and natural gas resources has been a portion of those initiatives.

But the hopes for greater energy development and environmental concerns have been colliding for decades. In 1969, six miles off the coast of Santa Barbara, the pipes of an offshore drilling rig burst, and almost 3 million gallons of oil were pumped into the coastal waters. Many consider that disastrous spill to be a galvanizing moment behind the passage of the Clean Water Act of 1972, which aimed to “restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the Nation's waters.”

After the Santa Barbara Spill, both the federal government and the California state government issued bans on leasing new offshore drilling fields. Oil companies have been allowed to continue drilling and developing energy resources on the fields already held under lease agreements prior

to the bans. As recently as 2008, there has been increased pressure to lease new offshore oil fields under federal control.

Proponents of increased offshore drilling argue that developing alternative domestic supplies of oil to compete with international suppliers will drive down the average cost of gas. Opponents of increased offshore drilling counter that it may result in an average price decrease of only a few cents. One of the reasons for such a modest decrease is that oil is an internationally traded commodity, the price of which is strictly monitored by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) that sells to countless buyers. The incredibly high demand for oil allows for only modest decreases in price even if alternative suppliers arise.

As of 2013, the federal government has begun to consider other means of opening coastal drilling sites besides designating new federal offshore fields. A new approach particular to California may involve the U.S. Air Force. The Vandenberg Air Force Base, located in central California, is situated on land owned and managed by the U.S. Air Force. This division of the United States military is able to lease certain portions of its properties as it so desires and therefore has the right to consider leasing the land to an oil drilling company interested in offshore possibilities. Oil companies conducting onshore operations would reach crude oil pockets offshore using a technique known as “slant drilling.” The drilling process would cut into the earth at an angle, creating a well that draws from sources possibly thousands of feet out to sea.

Proponents of slant drilling argue that basing the operation on land and running the drill line below the seafloor avoids all the risks that come with conventional offshore drilling. Since no pipes will be rising up from the ocean bottom, proponents claim that a tragedy like the 1969 Santa Barbara spill is impossible. Opponents and environmentalists have argued, however, that any drilling operation taking place on the California coast, whether on the shoreline or in deep water, poses an unacceptable risk to the coastal environment.

As the energy needs of the United States grow along with the energy needs of a growing global community, collisions between industrial development and environmental concerns may become more and more frequent. Even with the expansion of greener alternatives, more conventional energy sources are required to meet energy demands in the short term. In 1969 the people of California, determined to prevent another tragedy like the Santa Barbara Spill from ever happening again, would have had a hard time imagining a world in such desperate need of new energy resources. Would they have made the same decision to ban offshore drilling if they had been able to foresee this future?

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What do some Americans hope will lower gas prices?
 - A the protection of the California coastal environment
 - B bans on leasing offshore drilling fields to new companies
 - C developing energy resources within the United States
 - D obtaining more oil from the Middle East

2. The cause of the Santa Barbara Spill was offshore drilling. What was the effect?
 - A bans on leasing new offshore drilling fields were issued
 - B government initiatives to increase U.S. energy production
 - C there were more proponents of offshore oil drilling
 - D the U.S. Air Force was allowed to lease land that it owns

3. The green energy industry is used to help America meet its energy needs. What evidence from the passage supports this conclusion?
 - A Government initiatives for increasing energy production include developing offshore oil resources.
 - B Wind and solar power companies have appeared across the country.
 - C Some Americans are demanding increased drilling for oil.
 - D Oil companies have proposed slant drilling as an environmentally safe method.

4. What conclusion can be made about the U.S. Air Force?
 - A The U.S. Air Force is in favor of increased coastal drilling in California.
 - B The U.S. Air Force has no say in whether coastal drilling will increase.
 - C The U.S. Air Force is opposed to increased coastal drilling in California.
 - D The U.S. Air Force plays an important role in the coastal drilling debate.

5. What is this passage mostly about?
 - A the clash between U.S. energy development and environmental concerns
 - B the Santa Barbara Spill of 1969 and the Clean Water Act of 1972
 - C reasons for the current high prices of oil and gas in the U.S.
 - D a discussion of international politics surrounding natural resources

6. Read the following sentence: "Many consider that disastrous spill to be a **galvanizing** moment behind the passage of the Clean Water Act of 1972, which aimed to 'restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the Nation's waters.'"

What does "**galvanizing**" mean?

- A boring, uninteresting
- B worthwhile, important
- C rousing, causing action
- D surprising, unexpected

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Proponents of slant drilling argue that it avoids the risks associated with conventional offshore drilling; _____, opponents of slant drilling believe that it poses an unacceptable risk to the coastal environment.

- A therefore
- B namely
- C ultimately
- D however

8. What is "slant drilling"?

9. What do opponents of increased offshore oil drilling argue regarding the effects of increased oil drilling on average gas prices?

10. Explain whether “slant drilling” in California is a good solution to the rising cost of gas and increased energy demands in the United States. Support your answer using information from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1390

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8. What is "slant drilling"?

Suggested answer: "Slant drilling" is a drilling process that cuts into the earth at an angle, creating a well that can draw from crude oil pockets possibly thousands of feet out to sea.

9. What do opponents of increased offshore oil drilling argue regarding the effects of increased oil drilling on average gas prices?

Suggested answer: Opponents of increased offshore oil drilling argue that it may only result in an average price decrease of a few cents, because the price of oil is strictly monitored.

10. Explain whether "slant drilling" in California is a good solution to the rising cost of gas and increased energy demands in the United States. Support your answer using information from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Answers may include:

- Yes, slant drilling is a good solution, because it allows the U.S. to develop its own energy resources and drive down the cost of gas. Slant drilling avoids the risks that come with conventional offshore oil drilling, avoiding another disaster like the Santa Barbara Spill.
- No, slant drilling is not a good solution, because it poses an unacceptable risk to the California coastal environment. We do not want to repeat the disaster of the 1969 Santa Barbara Spill. Even if the U.S. develops its own energy resources, the price of gas will not decrease significantly because of the high demand for oil.