

Environmental Data and Governance Initiative Website Tracking Report

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Removal and change of language and content on the Government Accountability Office's explanation of risk in the management of federal oil and gas resources

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Removal and change of language and content on the Government Accountability Office's explanation of risk in the management of federal oil and gas resources.

The Government Accountability Office page on managing federal oil and gas resources has been edited to change the framework within which natural gas production is discussed and to remove content on the environmental and public health risks of shale oil and natural gas production.

Description

Every two years, the GAO identifies program areas that are high risk due to “vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or are most in need of transformation,” and maintains the list on its [website](#). In the most recent update to the list, the GAO has changed the framework within which federal oil and gas resources are discussed to expand the focus on job creation and economic benefits. It has also removed the section on the environmental and public health risks of shale oil and natural gas production and a proposed alternative. At the same time, a new section has been added highlighting the challenges in hiring sufficient human capital.

The most notable changes to this site are summarized here:

1. **Rewritten introductory paragraph:** This paragraph now focuses on job creation and economic benefits of oil and gas production. (1.1a)
2. **Removal of section on environmental and public health risks of shale oil and natural gas production:** This information is no longer available on the current version of the site. (1.1b)
3. **Addition of section on “human capital challenges”:** Notes that the Department of Interior faces challenges in hiring and retaining important staff. (1.1d)

Page 1: Management of Federal Oil and Gas Resources - High Risk Issue

- URL: www.gao.gov/key_issues/oil_and_natural_gas/issue_summary

Screenshot 1.1

- Side-by-side View: 2/15/17 - 2/16/17
- Change occurred between **Feb 15 2017 12:54 PM ET** and **Feb 16 2017 12:23 PM ET**

Note: The previous version of this page (comparison between 1/19/17 and 2/15/17) is shown in Screenshot 1.2 below.

(1.1a) **Rewritten first body paragraph.** Changed text to expand the page's focus on job creation and economic benefits of oil and gas production. The introduction now states that oil and gas resources “provide an important source of energy for the United States; create jobs in

the oil and gas industry; and generate billions of dollars annually in revenues that are shared between federal, state, and tribal governments. Interior reported collecting over \$49 billion from fiscal years 2011 through 2015 from royalties and other payments. This makes oil and gas resources one of the federal government's largest sources of nontax revenue." Additionally, text describing when and why oil and gas production were added to GAO as high risk areas was removed.

(1.1b) **Removal of section on environmental and public health risks of shale oil and natural gas production.** Specifically, removal of sentence: "Oil and natural gas development pose inherent environmental and public health risks, and studies have generally found that the potential long-term, cumulative effects of shale development have not been examined." In addition, references to hydraulic fracturing and exporting liquefied natural gas and its economic benefits were removed. Note that the introduction now states that the Department of the Interior needs to "ensure operational and environmental safety," even as the statements about inherent environmental risks were removed.

(1.1c) **Rewritten "Royalties" section.** This section adds text describing that the Department of Interior has "taken some steps" to strengthen management of federal oil and gas leases, though it does not specify what steps have been taken, and notes also that no steps have been taken to improve the verification of production and completeness of royalty data. Additionally, the previous version's caveat that "Because Interior has not always conducted production inspections, it is uncertain whether oil and natural gas operators accurately reported oil and natural gas production" has been removed.

(1.1d) **Addition of section on "human capital challenges."** This section now notes that the Department of Interior faces challenges in hiring and retaining important staff, as salaries are lower and hiring process longer than in the oil and gas industry. States that DOI has not evaluated the effectiveness of the efforts it has taken to mitigate these challenges.

(1.1e) **Amended federal oversight section.** Previous version referenced the continued challenges in prioritizing oversight and building IT and workforce to meet the needs of federal oversight. The Amended version notes that the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) continues to use policies that predate the Deepwater Horizon explosions. These "outdated policies and procedures do not require planning investigations, gathering and documenting evidence, and ensuring quality control, potentially undermining the effectiveness of investigations." As such, they risk BSEE's ability to "effectively oversee environmental compliance." The following excerpt was moved to a different part of the paragraph, but remained almost entirely the same: "Interior completed its restructuring of its oil and gas program in 2011, transferring offshore oversight responsibilities to two new bureaus—the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement." In addition, an explanation of the importance of the Deepwater Horizon explosion has been moved from a bullet-point to the introductory paragraph, and the following assertion was removed: that the accident was the impetus for "new safety and environmental requirements and policy changes designed to mitigate the risk of an offshore well blowout or spill."

(1.1f) Removal of sentence “This key issue page is related to an area on GAO’s 2017 High Risk Update and will be updated shortly. In the meantime, visit the [related High Risk area](#) for the newest information.”

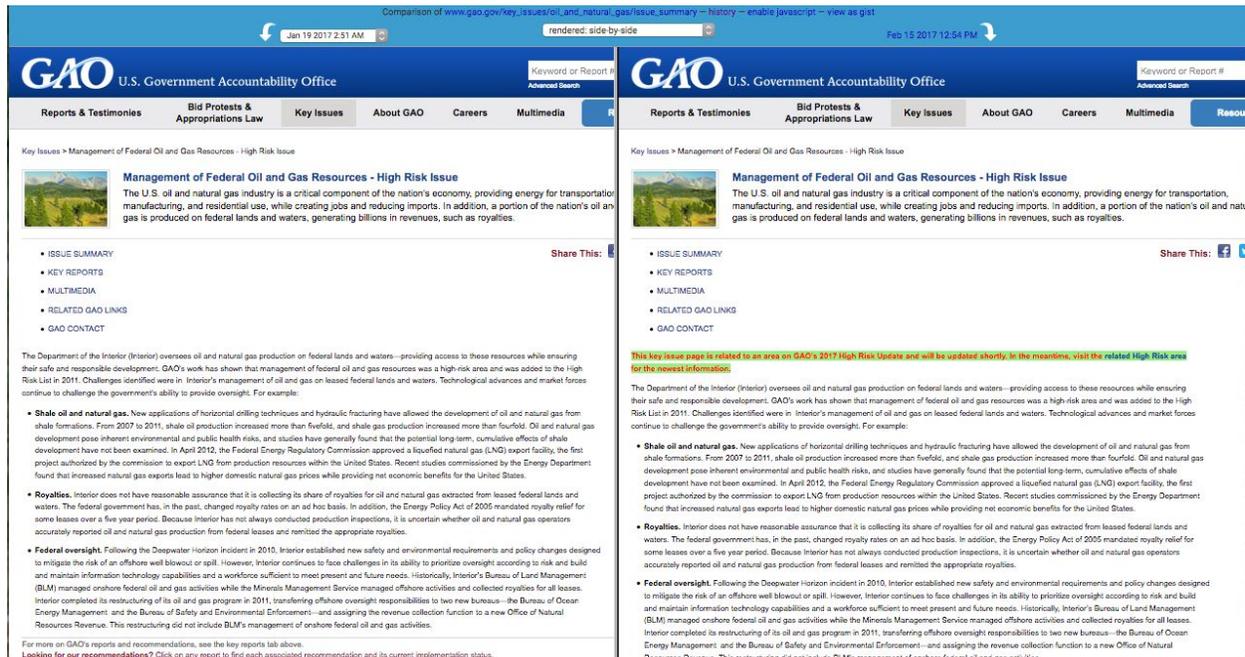
The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of the GAO website's 'Management of Federal Oil and Gas Resources - High Risk Issue' page. The left screenshot shows the page with a highlighted sentence: "This key issue page is related to an area on GAO's 2017 High Risk Update and will be updated shortly. In the meantime, visit the related High Risk area for the newest information." The right screenshot shows the same page but with this sentence removed. Both screenshots show the GAO logo, navigation tabs, and the main content area with a sub-header 'Management of Federal Oil and Gas Resources - High Risk Issue' and a brief introductory paragraph. The right screenshot also shows a list of related reports and a 'Share This' section.

April 4, 2017

Screenshot 1.2

- Side-by-side View: 1/19/17 - 2/15/17
- Change occurred between **February 14 2017 1:02 PM ET** and **Feb 15 2017 12:54 PM ET**

(1.2a) Addition of sentence “This key issue page is related to an area on GAO’s 2017 High Risk Update and will be updated shortly. In the meantime, visit the [related High Risk area](#) for the newest information.”



Internet Archive Page Status:

Note that the screenshot above comes from the website tracking software we use and changes the way the website is rendered. For the standard view, see links below.

Previous version from January 13, 2017:

http://web.archive.org/web/20170113102513/http://www.gao.gov/key_issues/oil_and_natural_gas/issue_summary

Revised version from February 17, 2017:

http://web.archive.org/web/20170217125440/http://gao.gov/key_issues/oil_and_natural_gas/issue_summary

The Internet Archive did not capture a version of the page on February 15, 2017

Additional EDGI Actions and Research Regarding These Changes:

EDGI submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to GAO on 2/25/17 for “all records related to the changes made to the GAO’s Key Issues webpage dealing with the management of federal oil and gas resources” in response to changes on this page.

Response to FOIA request received 2/27/17: “We have no records responsive to your request. Please be advised that the key issues page is periodically updated to reflect recent GAO work.

... As an agency responsible to the Congress, GAO is not subject to FOIA. However, GAO's disclosure policy follows the spirit of the act consistent with GAO's duties and functions as an agency with primary responsibility to the Congress."

For email correspondence regarding EDGI's FOIA request, please see the accompanying document.