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Greens: Offshore gas exploration will harm unique environment

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An environmental group is demanding that the state prevent oil and gas explorations which it says could damage one of Israel's most ecologically important and unique coastal regions.

About a year ago, the Energy Ministry approved oil and gas exploration in a section of the Mediterranean Sea more than 20 kilometers from the coast. The area lies west of Rishon Letzion and Palmachim.

One of the licensing areas,

called Cluster D, includes an underwater area known as the Palmachim Disturbance due to its geological history. Surveys have found a variety of marine habitats in the Palmachim Disturbance that contain unique species of marine life, including a species of coral that was apparently previously unknown to scientists.

Two months ago, the ministry announced which companies had won the exploration licenses, which also cover seismic surveys. At that point, the Society for

the Protection of Nature in Israel contacted the ministry and demanded that it prevent any exploration in Cluster D.

In their letter, CEO Iris Hann and legal adviser Noa Yayon noted that Cluster D encompasses most of the Palmachim Disturbance, an area whose importance the Energy Ministry itself recognized in a strategic environmental survey it commissioned. Moreover, the area is slated to become

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a nature reserve under a master plan for Israel's marine areas now being drafted by the Finance Ministry's planning administration.

"The danger to ecological systems in the proposed nature reserve as a result of operations to explore for and perhaps produce gas and oil is very great," the letter warned, adding that even the initial seismic surveys pose a threat. It also noted that deep-sea ecological systems are particularly vulnerable because of their slow rate of growth.

The Energy Ministry said its strategic environmental survey had concluded that exploration could be allowed in any area more than seven kilometers from the coast. It also argued that the area in question isn't very ecologically sensitive.

However, it added, there are still gaps in the minis-



Palmachim Beach. Cluster D is offshore here. Dov Greenblatt/SPNI

try's knowledge of the marine environment, and therefore, the companies that won the licenses "will be required to conduct a survey to ensure that there are no sensitive habitats near the area they want to develop."

The Palmachim Disturbance covers a very large area, the ministry's statement continued, and only small portions of it continue unique habitats. But even these need to be kept at most one kilometer from any drill site, it said.

The statement also noted

that the area hasn't yet been defined as a nature reserve. Finally, the ministry wondered why SPNI had waited to lodge its complaint for "more than a year after the areas slated for exploration were announced."

SPNI responded that it believes protecting certain sites within the Palmachim Disturbance is insufficient, and the whole area must be protected. It also said the ministry hadn't cross-checked the licensing areas against up-to-date maps of ecologically sensitive areas.