

## Arctic Ocean Missing Science and Oil Spill Response Must Come Before Development

Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) has introduced legislation that calls for increased safety and environmental requirements for oil and gas development. **S. 917, The Outer Continental Shelf Reform Act**, would update standards for Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) leasing program decisions to include protections for marine and coastal environments. It also would require that before development proceeds, a baseline of scientific information be included in a research and development program. In addition, the bill would allow new leases to have 90 days of review while establishing new standards for the rejection of exploration plans.



*Drifting ice over the Arctic Ocean. Copyright: Florian Schulz*

In the aftermath of the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico – the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history – any decisions about drilling in the fragile, remote Arctic must wait until the U.S. has the data necessary to assess and minimize the impacts of development on some of our nation’s most beloved wildlife species, and until companies such as Shell have the proven ability to clean up a spill in the Arctic’s sea-ice conditions. As noted by the National Oil Spill Commission report, there are “serious concerns about Arctic oil-spill response, containment, and search and rescue.” What’s more, the Arctic is experiencing the effects of climate change at twice the rate of the rest of the world, yet we don’t know how development will impact this already-stressed environment.

The marine environment of America’s Arctic Ocean – the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas – is among the least understood in the world. This wide swath of ice-covered ocean waters is home to one-fifth of the world’s threatened polar bears, as well as seals, migratory birds, endangered bowhead whales, several other species of whales, Pacific walrus and much more. The Inupiat people who live on Alaska’s North Slope call the Arctic Ocean “their garden.” The bowhead whale is the foundation for the Inupiat people’s subsistence culture.

Sen. Bingaman’s safety legislation is especially critical in the Arctic Ocean, where the Bureau of Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) just released a draft of a court-ordered redo of the environmental analysis for Lease Sale 193. The agency has identified hundreds of instances where it lacks scientific information – such as the migration patterns of whales and habitat use of walruses, beluga, fish and other species – but has determined that this information was not necessary to determine whether companies, like Shell Oil, could purchase drilling leases. BOEMRE’s new Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) also admits that a very large oil spill could occur from drilling in the Chukchi Sea. It is critical that missing information is gathered before the lease sale is deemed complete.

### **Safety and Environment Needed, Over Expedited Permits**

Currently, there is no proven way to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic’s extreme conditions, which is often called ‘the least understood area in the world’ due to a serious lack of scientific data available on the Arctic’s marine environment. Any legislation Congress approves must prioritize safety and environmental protection over expedited permits in the Arctic Ocean.