

**THE NATIVE VILLAGE OF POINT HOPE-THE CITY OF POINT HOPE-INUPIAT
COMMUNITY OF THE ARCTIC SLOPE-ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE-CENTER
FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY-EARTHJUSTICE-NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY-
NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL-NORTHERN ALASKA
ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER-OCEANA-PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT-REDOIL
SIERRA CLUB-THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY**

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Opposition Builds Against Drilling Arctic's Chukchi Sea
Alaska Natives and Conservation Groups Challenge Lease Sale

Juneau, AK - Alaska Natives and conservation groups joined forces today to fight oil drilling in the Arctic's Chukchi Sea. Thirty million acres of key polar bear, walrus, and whale habitat in the Chukchi Sea are scheduled to open to oil and gas companies on February 6, when the U.S. Interior Department's Minerals Management Service (MMS) plans to hold bidding for drilling leases.

A coalition made up of the Native Village of Point Hope, the City of Point Hope, the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, REDOIL (Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands), the Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Oceana, Pacific Environment, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society filed suit in federal district court in Alaska today, arguing that in making its decision to hold the lease sale, MMS did not adequately weigh the impacts oil and gas activities would have on wildlife like polar bears, or on native villages along Alaska's North Slope. The organizations are being represented by Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm.

The Chukchi Sea serves as the lifeblood for communities like the Native Village of Point Hope, where residents have relied on the sea for cultural and nutritional subsistence for thousands of years. "The Chukchi Sea is our garden. We've hunted and fished in the ocean for thousands of years" said Jack Schaefer, president of the tribal council of the Native Village of Point Hope. "The ocean is what our history and culture is based on. One oil spill could destroy our way of life."

The Chukchi Sea is also home to one-tenth of the world's polar bears, along with walruses and endangered bowhead whales. Polar bears are currently under consideration for listing as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. Earlier this month, the Interior Department announced it would delay its decision on whether or not to list the bear for approximately one month. The delay allows just enough time for the Chukchi lease sale to move forward on February 6.

"The MMS has admitted a substantial likelihood of oil spills in the Chukchi Sea," said Kristen Miller, legislative director for Alaska Wilderness League. "There is no proven method to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic's broken sea ice, or even to reliably clean up a spill in open water."

In addition to the risk of spills, conservationists and Alaska Natives argue that the administration has not fully addressed other impacts of oil and gas development, such as seismic testing, which can cause significant biological impacts to marine mammals, including bowhead whales. In its

decision to open the Chukchi, the agency also failed to consider the combined effects of global warming and oil and gas activities in the region.

"The Bush administration is rushing ahead to give oil companies as much of the Arctic's Chukchi Sea as it can without disclosing the full impact of oil and gas activities on the people and wildlife that depend on this fragile and rapidly changing ocean," said Earthjustice attorney Eric Jorgensen.

According to internal documents released by the whistleblower group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), the Interior Department ignored warnings by its own scientists that the agency had failed to fully assess the potential impacts of a lease sale in the area. The administration has also been criticized internationally for blocking scientists' policy recommendations in a recent report on drilling by the eight-nation Arctic Council.

Earlier this week, Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) introduced a bill that would prohibit any oil and gas activity in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas-"the Polar Bear Seas"-until the full impacts of exploration are understood. Legislation has also been introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Edward Markey (D-Mass.) requiring that the Chukchi lease sale be immediately delayed until a polar bear listing decision has been made.

"The decision of whether or not to drill the Arctic should be about science, not politics," said Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope. "Scientists have warned about the risks of drilling the Chukchi Sea. Hiding that information from the public doesn't make it go away."

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