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Arctic Drilling Plan Gets Green Light; Analysis of Impacts Sorely Lacking
MMS Approves Shell Plan for Beaufort Sea with little consideration for Arctic environment

ANCHORAGE - The federal government's Minerals Management Service put its rubber stamp on a plan today that allows Shell Offshore Inc. (Shell) to drill in Alaska's Beaufort Sea as early as this summer. MMS approved Shell's exploratory drilling plan despite a basic lack of fundamental information about the impacts of oil and gas development on the Arctic Ocean environment.

"This decision is very disappointing," said David Dickson, Western Arctic & Oceans Program Director at Alaska Wilderness League. "Once again, MMS approved a drilling plan without a full analysis of the potential consequences."

Shell's plan proposes exploratory drilling in the Beaufort Sea, 20 miles off the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, from July to October 2010, using a 514-foot long drill ship and an armada of support vessels and aircraft. This activity would generate industrial noise in the water while emitting tons of pollutants into the air and thousands of barrels of waste into the water.

"MMS is again trying to implement an overly aggressive Bush-era drilling plan in one of the riskiest areas on the planet to drill," said Whit Sheard, Alaska Program Director, for Pacific Environment. "Although fisherman, traditional indigenous communities, the courts, and the global scientific community have all condemned this plan, the Arctic continues to be treated like a sacrifice zone."

In addition, the risk of an oil spill in these waters is quite high, yet there is no technology and very little capacity to clean up such a spill in the Arctic's icy conditions.

"The reality of offshore oil drilling is that accidents will happen. And when oil spills in Arctic ice, there is no cleaning it up," said Chuck Clusen, Director, National Parks and Alaska projects at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "A blow-out like the one that recently despoiled waters off the coast of Australia would leave oil

in the waters off the coast of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for decades, killing whales, seals, fish and birds and turning irreplaceable spawning and feeding grounds into an ecological wasteland.”

Despite the fact that little is known about Shell’s proposed drilling area, the company’s analysis and disclosure downplay the risk of a blowout oil spill. The environmental impact assessment (EIA) does not assess the impacts of a large spill.

“It’s irrational to claim that drilling these Beaufort Sea formations is safe. The industry continues to repeat the erroneous assertion that new technology eliminates risk of blowouts and leaks. We need to open our eyes to see the fallacy of that trust in technology. New technology didn’t prevent the ongoing blowout in Australia’s Timor Sea. And after two months new technology hasn’t stopped oil spewing into the ocean and air.” said Layla Hughes, Senior Program Officer for Oil, Gas and Shipping Policy, Bering Sea/Arctic Ecoregion, for World Wildlife Fund. **“How would Shell respond to a blowout in the Beaufort Sea ice and brutal weather? Yet the company fails to analyze the potential impacts of such a spill. It’s simply irresponsible to move forward without the proper precautionary measures in place.”**

Shell’s planned drilling would take place along a key migratory route for the endangered bowhead whale – a critical subsistence source of food for the Inupiat people of Alaska’s North Slope. A Shell survey of the area showed an estimated 40 percent of the entire bowhead population swimming in waters proposed for drilling.

“Once again MMS is doling out favors to Big Oil at the expense of the polar bear,” said Rebecca Noblin, Staff Attorney at Center for Biological Diversity. **“If the polar bear is to survive in a rapidly warming Arctic, the government must protect its sea ice habitat, not turn it into a polluted industrial zone.”**

America’s Arctic Ocean is home to vibrant communities and abundant marine life: polar bears, walruses, ice seals, whales and much more. The Inupiat people call the Arctic Ocean their garden. They have lived off its bounty for thousands of years.

“There is no safe way to drill in the Beaufort Sea. Cleaning up an oil spill in the Arctic’s broken sea ice is next to impossible, and where there is drilling, there are oil spills,” said Athan Manuel, Public Lands Director for Sierra Club. **“A spill would threaten marine life like polar bears and bowhead whales. We don’t need to put our seas and marine life at risk. Instead of drilling for more dirty oil, we can shift to clean energy that will create jobs, combat global warming, and keep our wildlife and wild places intact.”**

The Arctic ecosystem depends on sea ice to thrive. As climate change ravages the region – the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world – this sea ice melts at a rapid pace. Scientists now predict that summer sea ice could be gone within a decade. Industrial development in these waters will only compound these impacts.

“Drilling in the Beaufort Sea will exacerbate the already dire impacts of global warming being felt by Alaskans – from local villages being forced to relocate from

their ancestral homelands as shorelines erode, to disappearing sea ice habitat critical to the imperiled wildlife of the region, “ said Lauren Hierl of the National Audubon Society. “The Department of Interior should be focusing its efforts on developing renewable energy sources that will be sustainable, not approving drilling plans that will further threaten the waters, lands, people and wildlife of America’s Arctic.”

The Arctic is the “least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth,” according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. Thus the full range of impacts from development is unknown.