

NATIVE VILLAGE OF POINT HOPE – ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE – CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY – DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE – NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL – NORTHERN ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER – OCEANA – PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT – RESISTING ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION ON INDIGENOUS LANDS (REDOIL) – SIERRA CLUB

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Shell Oil Beaufort Sea Drilling Plans Challenged
Analysis of Impacts Sorely Lacking

Anchorage, AK – Conservation and Alaska Native groups called for a timeout on oil drilling in the Arctic Ocean's Beaufort Sea today, filing a legal challenge against Shell Oil's permit to drill in the region next summer. According to the groups, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) followed the same weak permitting process used by the previous administration to approve Shell's prior drilling plan for the area, which was later blocked by a federal court.

MMS approved the drilling despite the proximity to the sensitive Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The drilling would take place as close as 20 miles away from the refuge between July and October 2010. A huge 514-foot-long drill ship and an armada of support vessels and aircraft would patrol the waters, emitting tons of pollutants, including heat-trapping gases, into the air, and thousands of barrels of waste into the sea. The Beaufort Sea is habitat for endangered bowhead whales, and the Arctic Refuge is important on-shore denning habitat for threatened polar bears.

MMS gave Shell the go-ahead on October 16 based on only a short, internal review of how the industrial activity would affect Arctic wildlife, including endangered bowhead whales and threatened polar bears, and Alaska Native communities that depend on subsistence hunting for their cultural and nutritional well-being. MMS once again failed to examine the particular impacts of the Shell drilling plan on the unique resources of the area it proposes to drill and refused to review in detail the impacts of an oil spill in the area, arguing the risks are too low.

Shell's plan to drill in the Beaufort Sea is part of a larger Arctic drilling program slated to begin in 2010. On December 7, Secretary Salazar also approved Shell's plan to drill up to three wells in the Chukchi Sea in 2010. Although not yet approved, Shell would also potentially drill in both the Beaufort and the Chukchi seas in future years.

The Department of the Interior's approval of Shell's drilling without adequate environmental analysis is a step in the wrong direction, but Shell still needs other permits before it can drill. It must obtain air emissions and ocean discharge permits from the Environmental Protection Agency and marine mammal harassment permits from the National Marine Fisheries Service. These agencies have an opportunity to take a different path than Interior and conduct the searching environmental analysis of the impacts of Shell's drilling that the law requires.

Secretary Salazar's approval of Shell's 2010 Arctic Ocean drilling runs directly counter to other Obama administration initiatives to reverse the previous administration's short-sighted and destructive Arctic policies and instead develop a science-based approach to managing the region. The Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force has identified proactive, science-based management of the Arctic as a priority. The Department of Commerce has adopted a protective Arctic Fisheries Management Plan that closes the Arctic Ocean to commercial fishing until more scientific information is available. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has also warned about the dangers of the rush to drill in the Arctic. Everyone agrees that large gaps remain in our scientific understanding of the Arctic Ocean – as the U.S. Arctic Research Commission stated, the Arctic is the “least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth.”

The Arctic is also a region under great stress from climate change. 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, threatening the very existence of species such as polar bears, seals, and walrus, that make the ice their home. Industrial development in these waters will only compound the problems.

Shell's drilling threatens oil spills. Nonetheless, the Minerals Management Service downplays the risks and impacts of oil spills, saying that they simply won't happen. If a large oil spill occurred, there is no technology and little capacity to adequately clean it up in the Arctic's icy conditions. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen noted in a recent Senate committee field hearing in Alaska that this lack of capacity to clean up a spill in the Arctic could spell disaster for the Arctic's pristine waters. An oil well blow-out like the one that recently fouled waters off the coast of Australia for over two months before being capped could leave oil in the ice and water and along the coast of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for decades. This would likely kill polar bears, birds, whales, seals, and fish and would devastate the subsistence culture of Alaska Native coastal communities.

Shell's planned drilling in both seas, as well as other offshore oil activities currently contemplated, 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 large numbers of bowhead whales resting and feeding in waters

proposed for drilling in the Beaufort Sea. This region also provides essential habitat for the threatened polar bear, and supports ringed seals, bearded seals, spotted seals, Pacific walrus, beluga whales, over sixty species of fish, and several million birds.

Today's challenge was filed in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals by the Native Village of Point Hope, Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Oceana, Pacific Environment, Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL) and Sierra Club. The organizations are being represented by Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm.

A challenge to MMS's approval of this exploration plan also was filed today by the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope.

Statements of Alaska Native and Conservation Group representatives:

"The ocean is our garden. We rely on it for our food and our culture. MMS's decision to allow Shell to drill for oil in the Arctic Ocean next summer recklessly endangers the traditional subsistence way of life we have sustained for thousands of years," said **Lily Tuzroyluke, Executive Director of the Native Village of Point Hope.**

"REDOIL, Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands, is in opposition to the exploration activities of Shell Oil which have been approved by the Minerals Management Service. We take this position as a means to protect indigenous culture. The Inupiat culture has thrived for thousands of years. We have a close relationship with the bowhead whales and marine life of our region. Climate change is happening. The proposed activities, which lack a credible plan to deal with oil spills, if allowed, can have a devastating effect on our already stressed ecosystem. Our ecosystem and culture should not be put in jeopardy for the profit of the oil industry," said **Robert Thompson, Inupiat resident of Kaktovik and the Chairman of REDOIL.**

"We were really hoping for change in the federal government's approach to America's Arctic," said **David Dickson, Western Arctic and Oceans Program Director for Alaska Wilderness League.** "While the proposed critical habitat designation for the polar bear was a good step forward, this shortcut approval for Shell's Beaufort drilling program is disappointing. It's beginning to look like status quo in America's Arctic."

"Apparently Secretary Salazar is blind to the supreme irony of fast-tracking harmful fossil fuel development in the very part of America most ravaged by global warming," said **Rebecca Noblin in the Anchorage office of the Center for Biological Diversity.** "If polar bears are to survive into the coming century, we must reject this kind of rushed, poorly planned oil drilling in favor of a more precautionary approach in the rapidly melting Arctic."

"Big Oil doesn't need to drill in one of the most fragile places on the planet to turn a profit. Polar bears and bowhead whales depend on the pristine waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi for food and survival," said **Nina Fascione, vice president of field conservation with Defenders of**

Wildlife. “Drilling there will eventually pollute the water and push these imperiled animals already threatened by global warming even closer to extinction.”

“The Obama administration has prioritized moving to clean energy and addressing climate change, and protecting the Arctic from drilling should be part of that approach,” said **Chuck Clusen, Alaska Project Director for Natural Resources Defense Council.** “As we move forward with cutting carbon pollution at home and around the world, the Department of Interior should make better choices for the Arctic, and not give in to the unreasonable demands of the oil industry.”

“Shell’s drilling brings with it the risk of large oil spills. Chronic spills are a fact of life from oil and gas operations on Alaska’s North Slope, where over 6,000 spills have occurred since 1996, and more than 400 of these took place at offshore oil fields. In the icy conditions of the Arctic Ocean, there is no way to effectively clean up spilled oil,” said **Pamela A. Miller, Alaska Program Director for Northern Alaska Environmental Center.**

“MMS and Shell must do it right. Americans deserve more from Secretary Salazar and President Obama than simply following an old path that puts the Arctic Ocean and Arctic communities at risk in order to serve short-term corporate interests,” said **Michael LeVine, Pacific Senior Counsel for Oceana.** “We can do this the right way. We can let science and precaution, not Shell Offshore, Inc., guide our Arctic decisions.”

“Global climate change is the single greatest threat to cultural and biological diversity of life on Earth. We still have a window of opportunity to reverse the effects of climate change so that people like the Inupiat can continue their traditional way of life and pass it down through the generations. Offshore drilling only exacerbates the climate crisis by threatening unique subsistence cultures, marine mammals and their Arctic habitat, fisheries, migratory birds, and air and water quality. It is time for the Obama administration to live up to its promises and bring ‘change that we can believe in’ and protect the Beaufort Sea and the people that depend on it,” said **Carole Holley of Pacific Environment.**

“It’s irresponsible for Shell to be pursuing dangerous offshore oil development when they know they can’t clean up oil spills in the Arctic’s broken sea ice. Instead of putting our children’s heritage at risk, we should be investing in the clean energy economy, which will create jobs, fight global warming, and leave our last wild places intact,” said **Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club Alaska Program Director.**

“Other federal agencies from which Shell must obtain additional permits to drill have choices to make – follow the Interior Department’s rush to develop oil before we know its impacts or follow the growing consensus that we need to proceed with caution in this unspoiled place already under great stress from climate change,” said **Erik Grafe of Earthjustice.**