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Arctic Drilling Plan Gets Green Light; Analysis of Impacts Sorely Lacking

Federal agency approves Shell oil drilling with little consideration for Arctic environment

Anchorage, AK - The federal government's Minerals Management Service put its rubber stamp on a plan today that allows Shell Oil to drill in Alaska's Chukchi Sea as early as next summer. MMS approved Shell's exploratory drilling plan without a full analysis of its potentially significant effects on wildlife and Alaska Native subsistence, already threatened by climate change, and despite a lack of fundamental scientific information about the region. Approval of the drilling follows recent approval by MMS of Shell's plans to drill in the adjacent Beaufort Sea in 2010.

“The proposed oil and gas activities affect the very foundations of who we are as individuals and as a people. We have a right to life, to physical integrity, to security, and the right to enjoy the benefits of our culture. For this, we will fight; we just hope not to die as a people during the process,” said Caroline Cannon, president of the Native Village of Point Hope on Alaska's North Slope.

Drilling approval comes even though the government has not yet resolved legal problems with the Bush-era five year leasing plan opening vast areas of the Arctic Ocean seabed to oil and gas activities.

“Oil and gas development is spreading rapidly across the Arctic,” said Earthjustice attorney Erik Grafe. **“Before moving forward we need to develop the missing science about the Arctic Ocean and the impacts of drilling and a better comprehensive plan for protection of the Arctic.”**

Last spring, a federal court of appeals in DC found this Bush/Cheney plan was illegal because it downplayed the environmental sensitivity of the very area where Shell wants to drill. A separate legal challenge to the decision made by the Bush administration to sell the leases in the Chukchi to Shell Oil on which it proposes to drill is also pending in the Alaska federal district court. The government is still making a decision about its position in that challenge.

“MMS’s approval of Shell’s drilling plan before it addresses these underlying legal questions puts the cart before the horse,” said David Dickson, Western Arctic and Oceans Program Director at Alaska Wilderness League. “It may prejudice its reconsideration of the Bush-era decisions to open these areas to oil and gas activities without first gathering missing information and putting in place a science-based management plan.”

Drilling for oil brings with it the risk of spills, as the recent Timor Sea spill in Australia dramatically demonstrates, yet there is no technology and very little capacity to clean up such a spill in the Arctic's icy conditions. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen noted in a recent Senate committee field hearing in Alaska that the 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 polluted ocean waters off Australia could leave oil in the waters off the coast of Alaska for decades, killing whales, seals, fish and birds and turning irreplaceable nursery and feeding grounds into an ecological wasteland.

“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 Karla Dutton, Alaska Program Director with the Defenders of Wildlife. “Alaskans value their wildlife, from polar bears to bowhead whales. This decision will certainly put that wildlife at risk. Unfortunately, it appears that Big Oil is calling the shots here.”

“The government agency itself [Minerals Management Service] projects a 40 percent chance of a major spill from Chukchi Sea oil leases,” said Pamela A. Miller, Alaska Program Director for Northern Alaska Environmental Center. “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.”

Other agencies in the Obama administration have taken steps to put in place a more reasoned, science-based approach to managing the Arctic Ocean, by, for example, closing the Arctic Ocean to commercial fishing until more science about the region is available. The Fish and Wildlife Service has also proposed that the very areas in which Shell proposes to drill be designated as critical habitat for threatened polar bears.

“The rapid expansion of industrial oil development in America’s Arctic could be the final nail in the coffin for struggling polar bears,” said Rebecca Noblin, staff attorney at Center for Biological Diversity. “It is time for the Obama administration to break from destructive Bush-era drill policies and give the iconic polar bear a fighting chance of survival.”

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.

“Oil and gas development will only further stress and rapidly increase the effects of climate change on this fragile marine Arctic ecosystem which is already experiencing significant challenges from the rapid pace of global warming,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, acting director of The Wilderness Society’s Alaska regional office. “Too little is understood about the effects that oil and gas exploration and development would have in the Arctic Ocean for this decision to be prudent.”

The Inupiat people have lived off the region’s whales, walruses, ice seals, and much more for thousands of years. Shell's drilling would take place along a key migratory route for the endangered bowhead whale - a critical subsistence source of food for the Inupiat people.

“This is one of the riskiest areas on the planet to drill,” said Whit Sheard, Alaska Program Director at Pacific Environment. “Although 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.”

Shell proposes exploratory drilling in the Chukchi Sea 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.

“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,” said Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director for Sierra Club.

The Arctic is the “least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth,” according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. Nonetheless, the MMS followed the pattern set by the prior Bush/Cheney administration by granting Shell the drilling permit without requiring a full environmental impact statement. Like the Bush/Cheney practice, no general public involvement was allowed and there was no opportunity for outside experts, representing the public’s interest, to comment on the inadequacies of the agency’s environmental analysis.

“They never even consider the impacts of a big spill from Shell’s drilling,” said Layla Hughes Senior Program Officer for Oil, Gas and Shipping Policy, Bering Sea/Arctic Ecoregion for World Wildlife Fund.

“We need to take a breath, do the science, and make sure we can deal with an oil spill in the icy waters of the Arctic before we start drilling,” said Michael LeVine, Pacific Senior Counsel for Oceana.