

ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * NATIVE VILLAGE OF POINT HOPE

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Federal Court to Interior Dept on Arctic Ocean: WE WILL BE WATCHING

WASHINGTON, DC - A federal court yesterday told the Department of Interior (DOI) that they will toss out a massive oil and gas leasing program in the Arctic Ocean and Bering Sea if DOI fails to follow through on its commitment to conduct a careful analysis of the environmental risks before authorizing any significant development activities.

Following up on an April 17 ruling that declared the Bush administration's 2007-2012 five-year plan for oil and gas development illegal because of an "irrational" analysis of the sensitivity of the fragile Arctic ecosystem, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia rejected a request by the American Petroleum Institute to allow the leasing program to proceed. Instead, the court declared that it will keep strict oversight over DOI as it conducts a new analysis, while retaining the option of vacating that program's Beaufort, Chukchi and Bering Sea components if DOI does not comply.

"The court has told industry and Interior that they will be watching to ensure that the environmental sensitivity to this massive leasing program is brought to light," said David Dickson, Western Arctic and Oceans Program Director of Alaska Wilderness League, a plaintiff in the case decided on April 17. "Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has pledged to do just that. The court's ruling yesterday essentially holds Secretary Salazar to his word while rejecting attempts by Big Oil to get around the fact that the current data about how oil and gas development will impact the fragile Arctic ecosystem is sorely inadequate."

The 2007-2012 Outer Continental Shelf drilling program would open more than 80 million acres in the Beaufort, Chukchi and Bering Seas to unprecedented levels of environmentally risky oil and gas development.

The Arctic region is already under immense stress from the effects of climate change – scientific evidence shows that the Arctic is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the planet, causing sea ice to melt at an accelerated pace. Alaska Native people who have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years and iconic Arctic wildlife – such as the threatened polar bear, endangered bowhead whale, Pacific walrus, and ice seals – are faced with dire impacts. Oil and gas development could compound these impacts.

"This drilling plan and the associated seismic testing, increases in vessel traffic, proposed large onshore and offshore infrastructure projects, and projections of oil spills in our unindustrialized homelands is extremely stressful," said Caroline Cannon, president of the Native Village of Point Hope, also a plaintiff in the April 17 case. "Our traditional knowledge indicates that each of these things independently threaten the existence of our

traditional culture. We are already facing the consequences of climate change and the industrialization of the Beaufort Coast. This cumulative stress may prove to be a tipping point.”

Despite the mounting impacts, the Bush administration pushed relentlessly forward with a massive development plan for the Arctic Ocean. Federal experts noted that there is a 40 percent chance of a large spill in the Chukchi Sea alone. Yet the environmental conditions in this icy region preclude even cursory clean-up efforts; no reliable method exists for cleaning up oil in broken sea ice.

“We strongly believe that Secretary Salazar’s assessment of the environmental sensitivity of the Arctic Ocean to oil and gas development will show that the Bush administration’s aggressive plans have no place in this unique, abundant ocean environment,” Dickson noted. “We look forward to working with Secretary Salazar to chart a new course for America’s Arctic.”

Plaintiffs Native Village of Point Hope, Alaska Wilderness League, and Pacific Environment are represented in the lawsuit by Peter Van Tuyn, Besseney & Van Tuyn, L.L.C.

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