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Feds Ignore Risks and Green Light Shell Drilling in Arctic Ocean

Agency continues to rubber-stamp dangerous offshore drilling; Scientists agree more data needed to understand the effects of oil development

Anchorage, AK – The U.S. Department of the Interior took a dangerous and disappointing leap towards drilling in the remote and fragile waters of America’s Arctic Ocean today. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) approved a plan by Shell Oil to conduct the first drilling in the harsh and remote Arctic Ocean since the *Deepwater Horizon* tragedy. Under this plan, Shell would start drilling in the Beaufort Sea in summer 2012.

Shell’s drilling risks a major oil spill, and neither Shell nor the government could respond adequately to such a catastrophe. It risks harming the endangered bowhead whale, a species central to Alaska Native subsistence traditions. Today’s decision to rubber-stamp Shell’s drilling ignores many of the lessons of the Gulf tragedy and the recommendations of government scientists and puts the Arctic Ocean and its coastal communities at great risk.

BOEMRE approval of Shell’s drilling plan is silent as to the agency’s assessment of Shell’s oil spill plan. BOEMRE should not have approved Shell’s drilling plan without an adequate, approved oil spill plan demonstrating Shell’s ability to cleanup an oil spill in the Arctic’s icy waters. After the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, the National Oil Spill Commission identified “the failure to plan effectively for a large-scale, difficult-to-contain spill” in the Arctic as one of the “three critical issues or gaps in the government’s existing response capacity.” As Commandant Admiral Robert Papp admitted to members of Congress last week, the federal government currently has “zero” spill response capability in the Arctic. Today BOEMRE ignored these concerns and approved Shell’s drilling despite an oil spill plan that:

- Assumes that Shell can recover an unprecedented 95 percent of oil spilled in



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Arctic water using mechanical containment and recovery efforts (like booms and skimmers), despite the fact that such efforts only recovered 8 percent of oil after the *Exxon Valdez* spill, and only 5 percent of oil after the *Deepwater Horizon* spill;

- Ignores the fact that the most recent oil spill response drill in the Beaufort Sea described mechanical cleanup efforts in icy conditions as a “failure;” a video of this [drill obtained by Oceana](#) shows how ineffective mechanical recovery efforts are in Arctic waters; and,
- Only plans for a “worst case” spill in relatively warm and ice-free August conditions despite the fact that Shell wants to drill through October, when ice, darkness and bad weather prevail.

Additionally, BOEMRE’s approval of Shell’s drilling plan does not resolve the potential for other significant impacts to the Arctic environment. In late June, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) released a comprehensive assessment of existing scientific data on the effects of oil and gas development in America’s Arctic Ocean. The USGS report reinforces what scientists inside and outside the government have been saying for years—we need a basic understanding of the Arctic Ocean ecosystem before we can drill there. What we do know is that Shell’s planned drilling is directly in the fall migration path of endangered bowhead whales and could block them from reaching an important feeding and resting area. Shell estimates close to 5,600 migrating bowhead whales, almost half the population, could be exposed to sound and disturbance from the drilling and icebreaking that could cause them to change their behavior and avoid the feeding area. This could harm the population, particularly mothers and young calves, and could affect Alaska Native communities that rely on the bowhead whale and other species to sustain their subsistence way of life.

“This is a disaster waiting to happen, but still BOEMRE is moving forward with Arctic Ocean drilling,” said Earthjustice attorney Holly Harris. “Scientific integrity and government accountability took their familiar back seat to oil company profits and power today. BOEMRE’s decision to disregard science and gamble with a region that is crucial to endangered bowhead whales, seals, polar bears and other marine wildlife and that Native subsistence communities rely upon so heavily is inexcusable. Today’s decision is nothing more than the administration’s decision to roll the dice with the Arctic.”

“The Obama administration continues its policy of selling off the environment and through that, Alaska Native peoples, to the highest bidder. We know that there’s no



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way to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic. The Department of Interior knows it too. Approving Shell's exploration plan for the Beaufort Sea is a completely irrational decision, driven by industry greed and politicians rather than science and the health of people and the environment," said Carole Holley, Alaska program co-director with Pacific Environment.

"Today's announcement is proof that all of Secretary Salazar's promises of reform after the *Deepwater Horizon* amount to nothing. This Administration is as willing as ever to rubber stamp dangerous drilling plans in the Arctic Ocean," said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"We've already watched oil spreading over Prince William Sound. Last summer we watched it gush into the Gulf of Mexico. If we fail to act on the lessons learned from these tragedies, we could soon find ourselves in Alaska's Arctic, watching another disaster unfold," said Andrew Hartsig, Director of Ocean Conservancy's Arctic Program. "A comprehensive Arctic research program is needed to promote informed decision-making on oil and gas activities and to measure and monitor impacts on Arctic ecological resources. The necessary work can begin now, and it can be conducted within a reasonable period of time. With that information in hand, we can make no-regrets choices for our Arctic seas."

"Everyone from the Coast Guard to local community leaders has said they are ill-equipped and unable to properly respond to an oil spill in the Arctic, yet now we are letting Shell move forward with drilling in severe weather conditions in America's most pristine and unique frontier," said Chuck Clusen, director of Alaska projects for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "This is either the height of irresponsibility or ignorance, but either way it should be stopped."

"Because Congress and the Obama Administration have not implemented many significant post-BP spill reforms, the public is not confident that everything is being done that can be done to prevent major spills in the Arctic. Shell's word that the company is trying to prevent spills is not good enough," said Lois Epstein, an engineer and Arctic Program Director at The Wilderness Society.

"This decision is bad for Arctic wildlife, such as polar bears and bowhead whales, and bad for the people of the Arctic who rely on these animals for their way of life. Instead of moving forward with drilling in the amazing oceans and wild lands of America's last frontier, we should be investing in ways to make our cars and trucks go



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further on a tank of gas and move beyond oil,” said Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director for the Sierra Club's Resilient Habitats campaign.

“REDOIL, Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands, is in opposition to the exploration activities of Shell Oil which have been approved by BOEMRE. 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 a foreign oil giant,” said Robert Thompson, Inupiat resident of Kaktovik and the Chairman of REDOIL.

“It is time for the Obama administration to commit to the truth about an Arctic oil spill,” Oceana Pacific Senior Director, Susan Murray said. “The American public should no longer be given misinformation, if a spill will be impossible to clean up in the Arctic that needs to be stated.”

“Just this June, the USGS reported gaping holes in our understanding of the Arctic Ocean, yet the administration ignores these realities by declaring that offshore drilling would have no significant impact on this fragile marine environment,” said Sierra Weaver, attorney for Defenders of Wildlife. “By putting Shell one step closer to dangerously risky drilling, the administration puts the wildlife and people that depend on the fragile Arctic ecosystem on thin ice.”

“Shell’s oil drilling risks major spills that could devastate nearby coasts, including our nation’s treasured Arctic National Wildlife Refuge roughly a dozen miles away,” said Pamela A. Miller, Arctic Program Director, Northern Alaska Environmental Center in Fairbanks, Alaska. “The toxic pollution and noisy disturbance from the exploration wells threaten refuge resources dependent upon marine and nearshore estuary waters, as well as surrounding coastal habitats so vital to polar bears, migratory birds, caribou, Alaska Native subsistence, and recreation. Our preeminent wilderness refuge deserves better care than the offshore agency has shown.”

“Shell’s oil spill plans are full of inadequacies and falsehoods. For example, Shell assumes they can clean up 95 percent of the oil spilled using mechanical recovery, even though in the Exxon Valdez only had 8 percent of the oil was recovered, in Deepwater Horizon, it was 3 percent,” said Leah Donahey, Western Arctic and



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Oceans Program Director, Alaska Wilderness League. “Conditional approval of Shell’s Beaufort exploration plan with no way to clean up a spill in the Arctic’s pristine, marine environment is unconscionable.”

“Drilling for oil in the America’s pristine Arctic comes at unbearable costs, in risk, in real dollars and in terms of irreversible damage to the environment,” said Bill Eichbaum, Vice President for Marine and Arctic Policy at WWF. “We are disappointed in the Department of Interior for ignoring the findings of the President’s Oil Spill Commission report, for rewarding insufficient planning and for capitulating to corporate interests. Arctic weather conditions would actually prevent any response for a significant period of time. Did we really learn nothing from Deepwater Horizon disaster?”

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