

## Arctic Ocean Offshore Development 101

America's Arctic Ocean and surrounding coasts are a national treasure. Today our wild Arctic is at risk of being lost to dangerous oil drilling. The Arctic's Chukchi and Beaufort Seas are home to many of our nation's most beloved wildlife species—polar bears, walrus, ice seals, bowhead whales, beluga whales and more—and these Arctic waters are the garden for Alaska Natives who have thrived off their bounty for thousands of years.

Shell Oil is the first oil company to move forward with offshore development in these waters. In September 2012, the Obama administration green lighted Shell to start preliminary drilling, but because of countless failures Shell wasn't able to drill into zones deep enough to hit oil. A few months later, Shell Oil Company announced that it will not drill in the Arctic in 2013. Despite six years of preparation, Shell's 2012 drilling program encountered so many problems that it has now been rendered unable to complete any oil drilling from exploration wells for two summer drilling seasons. Shell's experiences should be a cautionary tale as decisions are made about whether to authorize these activities in the future.



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### Lack of scientific information about Arctic Ocean ecosystems

The Arctic Ocean is known as the “least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth” (U.S. Arctic Research Commission). There is a lack of basic science about the Arctic's marine environment – from simple species counts of fish and marine mammals to information about currents and tidal systems. What's more, the Arctic is experiencing the effects of climate change at twice the rate of the rest of the world, yet we don't know how development will impact this already-stressed environment.

In June 2011, the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the federal government's scientific arm, released a report that stated that “it is difficult, if not impossible” to make informed decisions about oil and gas development in America's Arctic Ocean. With hundreds of pieces of key information missing, an inadequate synthesis of existing scientific data and a need to gather additional types of information such as traditional knowledge from Alaska Natives, USGS argues that now is the time to be conducting rigorous scientific analysis on the impacts of drilling in the Arctic Ocean.

### No technology to clean up an oil spill in sea ice

An oil spill in the Arctic Ocean would not only be impossible to clean up, but it also would likely become an environmental catastrophe. During the winter months, these Arctic seas are covered by sea ice sheets up to 25-feet thick and are extremely difficult to navigate. If a spill started as winter ice sets in, it would be impossible to reach the oil – which means that oil would continue to gush into the sea and under the ice for up to eight months.

The Arctic Ocean is prone to hurricane-force storms, 20-foot swells, sub-zero temperatures and months of darkness. There is no proven way to clean up an oil spill in these extreme conditions. What's more, the Arctic has extremely limited infrastructure (there are no roads or deep water ports and only a handful of small airports) and the nearest Coast Guard station is 1,000 miles away.

Administration officials themselves have expressed concerns about spill response in the Arctic. Former BOEMRE Director Michael Bromwich said that in the Arctic “spill response is a question.” Similarly, Admiral Robert Papp, the top officer at the U.S. Coast Guard, recently told Congress that if the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster was “to happen off the North Slope of Alaska, we’d have nothing. We’re starting from ground zero today.”

**The Bottom Line:**

President Obama cannot allow drilling in the Arctic Ocean. Shell’s long list of setbacks and failures – coupled with the extreme risk for oil spills and further climate destruction in an already fragile ecosystem – provides overwhelming evidence that the oil and gas industry is not prepared to operate safely in the Arctic Ocean. President Obama should prioritize protecting the Arctic as part of his climate legacy and not approve any further offshore drilling in the region.

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