

Earthjustice * Alaska Wilderness League * Center for Biological Diversity * Friends of the Earth *
Natural Resources Defense Council * Northern Alaska Environmental Center * Sierra Club *
The Wilderness Society

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 31, 2015

Department of the Interior Opens Gate for Risky Oil Drilling in the Arctic's Chukchi Sea

Agency reaffirms Bush-era oil drilling leases despite threats to fragile Arctic climate, animals and communities

Anchorage, Alaska —Ignoring its own environmental review, the U.S. Department of the Interior has opened the door for drilling in the remote and iconic Arctic Ocean. The agency announced today that it is reaffirming controversial Bush-era Arctic oil leases, after a [court-ordered re-analysis](#) of the lease sale decision showed that opening the Chukchi Sea to oil drilling will have even more dramatic and long-lasting effects and risks than previously disclosed.

In January 2014, in litigation brought by Earthjustice on behalf of fourteen conservation and Alaska Native groups, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Chukchi Lease Sale 193 was held unlawfully. This marked the second time the massive offshore oil and gas sale had been sent back by the courts. Interior's supplemental [environmental impact statement](#) released in February concluded that drilling in the Chukchi Sea will have significant negative and long-lasting impacts on our waters, animals and Arctic communities. It concluded there is a 75 percent risk of one or more large oil spill when these leases are developed. There is no way to clean up a major oil spill in the Arctic Ocean. Further, Arctic oil development undermines the administration's efforts to address climate change and transition to a clean energy future. But, Interior reaffirmed the leases anyway.

Interior rushed the process of reconsidering the leases, issuing a flawed final environmental impact statement less than two months after it received hundreds of thousands of comments on the draft. Rather than take the time fully to assess the impacts and alternatives of leasing in the Chukchi Sea, Interior catered to Shell Oil's desire to drill as early as this summer. Interior should not compound today's misstep by rushing to approve Shell's plans to drill this summer, which can only now be formally reviewed by the department. Shell's planned drilling is even bigger, dirtier, and louder than in 2012, calling for more sound [disturbances and harassment](#) of whales and seals, than the company's previous plans and does not address adequately the company's failed efforts to drill in 2012. Interior should take additional time to evaluate Shell's drilling plans.

"We are disappointed in Interior's rushed lease sale decision," **said Erik Grafe, Earthjustice staff attorney.** "Interior still has time to make a better decision when evaluating Shell's drilling plan, and we sincerely hope it says no to Shell's louder, bigger, and dirtier tactics, loaded with potential environmental harm. The region is suffering dramatically under climate stress, and drilling will only further stress the region's wildlife and people and ultimately worsen climate change. The Arctic Ocean's fossil fuels must remain in the ground if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change."

"As the U.S. prepares to take over the Arctic Council it's more important than ever to show leadership in keeping dirty fuels in the ground, especially in the Arctic. Permitting new drilling in the Arctic Ocean is tremendously risky for the climate, but also for our waters, wildlife and the communities that rely on them," **said Dan Ritzman, Alaska program director for Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign.**

"The industrial oil development that Interior hopes will flow from its decision to approve the Chukchi lease sale gives us a 75 percent chance of a large oil spill and a 100 percent chance of worsening the climate crisis," **said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity.** "I don't like those odds."

"It is unconscionable that the federal government is willing to risk the health and safety of the people and wildlife that live near and within the Chukchi Sea for Shell's reckless pursuit of oil," **said Marissa Knodel, a climate campaigner with Friends of the Earth.** "Shell's dismal record of safety violations and accidents, coupled with the inability to clean up or contain an oil spill in the remote, dangerous Arctic waters, equals a disaster waiting to happen."

"It's shocking that the Department of the Interior would knowingly move forward with a plan that has a 75 percent chance of creating a major spill in the Chukchi Sea. We can't trust Shell or any other oil company with America's Arctic. Shell has proposed an even dirtier and riskier Arctic drilling program for this summer. The Obama administration has seen the impacts of what a major oil spill looks like. On the fifth anniversary of Deepwater Horizon, we should learn our lesson and say no greenlighting Shell's plans drill in the Arctic," **said Cindy Shogan, executive director of Alaska Wilderness League.**

"With more than a 75 percent chance of a major oil spill occurring if drilling moves forward, the Arctic Ocean and its sensitive coastlines stand a significant chance of being damaged," **said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska regional director for The Wilderness Society.** "Given that fact, and the adverse climate impacts from drilling and burning Arctic Ocean oil, allowing drilling in the Arctic Ocean would place sensitive areas and Arctic communities at unnecessary risk and is in conflict with the administration's climate goals."

"Our Arctic ocean is flat out the worst place on Earth to drill for oil," **pointed out Niel Lawrence, NRDC's Alaska director.** "The world's last pristine sea, it is both too fragile to survive a spill and too harsh and remote for effective cleanup. Shell's disastrous misadventures there in 2012 prove it can never be a secure source of energy for America and, winning on climate change means leaving its oil safely untouched and investing, instead, in renewables and efficiency."

"If Shell is allowed to drill in the Arctic Ocean the administration has essentially said a 75 percent chance of a spill is an acceptable risk," **said Northern Alaska Environmental Center Executive Director Elisabeth Dabney.** "A risk not only to Inupiaq culture and livelihood, but to entire ecosystems of the Alaskan North Slope. This, all while ignoring sound science which indicates this extreme extraction would increase black carbon, speed ice melts and therefore increases temperatures in a rapidly warming Arctic."

CONTACTS

Erik Grafe, Earthjustice, 907-792-7102

Virginia Cramer, Sierra Club, 804-519-8449

Rebecca Noblin, Center for Biological Diversity, 907-274-1110

Marissa Knodel, Friends of the Earth, 202-222-0729

Gwen Dobbs, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-544-5205

Nicole Whittington-Evans, The Wilderness Society, 907-351-8844

Jeff Benzak, Natural Resources Defense Council, 202-513-6248

Elisabeth Dabney, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, 907-452-5021