



USGS Arctic Study: “Difficult, if not impossible” to proceed with drilling in America’s Arctic Ocean

In March 2010, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar asked the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to conduct a special review of information on the Arctic’s Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, in order to better “understand the resources and challenges” in this unique, fragile marine environment. Specifically, Secretary Salazar asked the USGS to examine the “effects of exploration activities on marine mammals; determine what research is needed for an effective and reliable oil spill response in ice-covered regions; evaluate what is known about the cumulative effects of energy extraction on ecosystems; and review how future changes in climate conditions may either mitigate or compound the impacts from Arctic energy development.”

No effective way to clean up oil spilled in ice-covered waters

In June 2011, USGS released its report, which states 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, inadequate synthesis of existing scientific data and a need to gather additional types of information such as traditional knowledge from Alaska Natives, the report argues that now is the time to be conducting rigorous scientific analysis on the impacts of drilling in the Arctic Ocean.

The report also analyzes current oil spill response techniques and technologies proposed by companies such as Shell Oil and concludes there is “no comprehensive method for clean-up of spilled oil in sea ice.” For example, the report states that despite technological advances in mechanical recovery for oil spill response, “many of these may face severe limitations during deployment due to ice-processing challenges, extreme weather (freezing) conditions, and changing conditions in the ice itself.” In broken ice conditions, the amount of oil that could be cleaned up using mechanical recovery techniques is estimated at a mere 1 to 20 percent, according to the USGS report.

The report found that the effects of a spill on the surrounding Alaska Native communities is unknown: “Additional information is needed to determine the potential hazard to native subsistence livelihoods from oil and gas exploration and development, since development can impact all parts of the spectrum from the specific subsistence animals themselves through tier food chain ecosystem.”

Chukchi Lease Sale 193

Just before the USGS report was released, the Bureau of Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) released a revised environmental analysis of 2008 lease sale 193 in the Arctic’s Chukchi Sea that once again fails to take into account crucial gaps in information. BOEMRE concludes “that while many statements of incomplete or unavailable information were broadly relevant to the important issues at hand, none were essential for a reasoned choice among alternatives.” BOEMRE must take into account the conclusions of the USGS report – no informed decisions about drilling can be made right now in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas – before signing off on Lease Sale 193.

Bottom line: Make the right decision for America’s Arctic Ocean

Secretary Salazar must reconcile two very different opinions from agencies under his command. With the release of its revised environmental analysis for Chukchi Lease Sale 193, BOEMRE implies that missing scientific data is not necessary to make decisions about moving forward with development in America’s Arctic Ocean. Meanwhile, USGS says it is “difficult, if not impossible” to make informed decisions at this point. The USGS report makes it clear that there are too many unknowns and that it is too risky to drill America’s Arctic. Secretary Salazar and President Obama must take time to make deliberate and thoughtful decisions before moving forward – and follow through on their commitment to make decisions based on “sound science” and not politics. The administration’s priority must be protecting the wildlife and people whose survival is linked to the Arctic Ocean.

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