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Green groups decry Alaska oil lease plan

ANCHORAGE, Alaska

The federal government will open up nearly 46,000 square miles off Alaska's northwest coast to petroleum leases next month, a decision condemned by environmental groups that contend the industrial activity will harm northern marine mammals.

The Minerals Management Agency planned the sale in the Chukchi Sea without taking into account changes in the Arctic brought on by global warming and proposed insufficient protections for polar bears, walrus, whales and other species that could be harmed by drilling rigs or spills, according to the groups.

The lease sale in an area slightly smaller than the state of Pennsylvania was planned without information as basic as the polar bear and walrus populations, said Pamela A. Miller, Arctic coordinator with Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

"The Minerals Management Service is required to have preleasing baseline data sufficient to determine the post-leasing impacts of the oil and gas activities that will occur," Miller said. "They simply do not have that."

The MMS announced it would hold a lease sale Feb. 6 in Anchorage for the ocean floor on the outer continental shelf of the Chukchi Sea, the body of water that begins north of the Bering Strait and stretches between northwest Alaska and the northern coast of the Russian Far East.

The MMS is a branch of the Interior Department. Its stated mission is to manage ocean energy and mineral resources on the outer continental shelf and federal and Indian mineral revenues to enhance public and trust benefits, promote responsible use, and realize fair value.

It would be the first federal OCS oil and gas lease sale in the Chukchi Sea since 1991. The agency estimates it contains 15 billion barrels of conventionally recoverable oil and 77 trillion cubic feet of conventionally recoverable natural gas.

MMS director Randall Luthi said the agency took steps to protect wildlife.

"MMS funds a robust environmental studies program to monitor the effects of industry activity in the OCS, including more than 40 ongoing Arctic-specific studies," said Luthi. "Following up on a workshop attended by over 100 scientists and stakeholders, we are inaugurating a new suite of research for the Chukchi Sea to further monitor marine mammals, other communities, hydrocarbons, and subsistence uses."

The sale is backed by Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and community and tribal leaders, he said.

"We believe our decision is a good balance, and will allow companies to explore this intriguing frontier area while still protecting the resources important to the coastal residents," Luthi said.

Miller and Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity said the MMS ignored dangers to animals and birds if an oil spill were to occur.

"No one yet has figured out how to clean up a spill in broken ice, so they just stick their head in the sand and pretend it won't happen," Cummings said.

He also said the agency's environmental assessment ignored changes brought by global warming.

The Chukchi Sea, he said, is the nation's most important habitat for Pacific walrus. The lease sale assumes a stable walrus population, ignoring developments of 2007. Unlike seals, walrus cannot swim indefinitely and must "haul out" on ice or land to rest. In late summer, thousands of animals hauled out on the northwest Alaska coast for several months because their usual platform for foraging, sea ice, receded far beyond the relatively shallow continental shelf over waters too deep for walrus to dive for food.

On the Russian side of the Chukchi Sea, biologists recorded herds gathering on shore instead of the pack ice, including one group of up to 40,000 animals at Point Shmidt, a spot that had not been used by walrus as a haulout for a century. Russian biologists estimate that 3,000 to 4,000 mostly young animals were crushed in stampedes when polar bears, hunters or low-flying aircraft startled walrus and sent them rushing to the safety of the sea.

"It doesn't address the reality that things are happening rapidly with walrus and we need to be very, very careful in what we do," Cummings said of the lease plan.

The Chukchi Sea also is home to one of two U.S. polar bear populations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is days away from deciding whether polar bears should be declared threatened because of global warming and its effect on the animal's primary habitat, sea ice.

"The chances for the continued survival of this icon of the Arctic will be greatly diminished if its last remaining critical habitat is turned into a vast oil and gas field," said Margaret Williams, managing director of World Wildlife Fund's Kamchatka and Bering Sea Program.

Polar bears spend most of their lives on sea ice. They use sea ice to hunt their primary prey, ringed seals. In Alaska, females use sea ice to den or to reach denning areas on land.

Arctic sea ice last summer plummeted to the lowest levels since satellite measurements began in 1979, according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center at the University of Colorado.

The sale area will not include nearshore waters ranging from about 25 to 50 miles from the coast, Luthi said. That nearshore buffer is used by bowhead and beluga whales, other marine mammals, and marine birds migrating north in the spring, Luthi said, as well as subsistence hunters from coastal villages.

Cummings said the agency used inadequate standards for assessing the effect of sound from exploration seismic and drilling activity. It also failed to take into account recent sightings of endangered fin and humpback whales in the Chukchi Sea, he said.

"The buffer may put activities out of sight from land but it certainly doesn't shield the land from an oil spill," he said.