

Court orders Shell to suspend Arctic offshore drilling program

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska: Shell Oil has been ordered to halt its exploratory drilling program off the north coast of Alaska until a court hearing can be held on the possible environmental impact of the venture.

The order came Thursday from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit.

The order comes after the U.S. Minerals Management Service in February approved Shell's offshore exploration plan for the Beaufort Sea.

Shell spokesman Curtis Smith said Friday that company officials are obviously disappointed.

"But the court has asked for more information and we will provide it. We will comply with the court order and continue to welcome discussions with the North Slope communities," he said. "Alaska is a long-term investment for Shell."

Shell was the high-bidder in two recent lease sales for offshore tracts in the Arctic. In 2005, Shell Exploration & Production Co., part of Royal Dutch Shell PLC, spent more than \$44 million (€31.88 million) for offshore leases in the Beaufort Sea.

In April, the company intensified its program by bidding \$39 million (€28.25 million) for offshore leases, including more than \$14 million (€10.14 million) for Flaxman Island northwest of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The plan submitted by Shell Offshore Inc. proposed to drill up to 12 exploration wells on 12 tracts over three years, including four exploration wells this summer.

That prompted the North Slope Borough, several conservation groups and a grassroots group of American Indians and Alaska Natives to file a lawsuit.

Shell more recently was issued air quality control draft permits to operate a drilling platform and drilling vessel on the western side of Camden Bay. The company has not done any actual work on the slope, however, Curtis said.

Groups contend that MMS approved Shell's plan without fully looking at the harm it could do. Groups are concerned that offshore drilling, particularly if there was a large spill, would be catastrophic to marine mammals, including bowhead and beluga whales. They question whether cleaning up a sizable spill would even be possible in the icy waters off northernmost Alaska.

Polar bears also could be harmed, said Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity, another one of the petitioners.

"Polar bears are already threatened by global warming," he said. "Opening up some of their most important habitat in the United States to oil drilling and development would push them ever further down the path to extinction."

The court ordered Shell to stop the program until an Aug. 14 hearing in San Francisco.

"This is a great relief to the people of the North Slope," said Faith Gemmill, a member of REDOIL, which stands for Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands, one of the groups challenging Shell.