

BLM offers supplemental analysis of oil, gas activity in Alaska reserve
Inside Energy with Federal Lands August 27, 2007

Copyright 2007 The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. <http://www.mcgrawhill.com>

All Rights Reserved



Inside Energy with Federal Lands

August 27, 2007

SECTION: FEDERAL LANDS; Pg. 7

HEADLINE: BLM offers supplemental analysis of oil, gas activity in Alaska reserve

BYLINE: Jean Chemnick

BODY:

The Bureau of Land Management began a process that may lead to increased oil and natural gas drilling in the Northeast section of Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve last week as it made public an amended environmental impact statement on the area.

The supplemental EIS is a response to a decision last September by a federal judge in Anchorage, Alaska, who ruled that the agency had not sufficiently considered the cumulative effects of drilling and other factors on the environment of northern Alaska.

Since the original EIS was completed in 2005, MMS and stakeholders have completed various studies, measuring the effects of oil and gas development, the building and presence of a pipeline to NPR-A, new development in the nearby Chukchi Sea, climate change and polar bears, among other things. A study was also conducted on the effects of production on human health in the region.

BLM spokeswoman Sharon Wilson called the 4.6-million-acre Northeast section of the NPR-A "probably one of the most researched areas in the United States right now." Climate change and polar bear survival (the animals are being considered for an endangered species listing) would not have been considered when the first EIS of the area was completed in 1998. "That wasn't on the radar screen at the time," Wilson said. The rising cost of oil informed BLM's planning, as well, she added.

The new proposal will lay out four alternatives, and BLM will not single one out as its preference. These include one "no action alternative" that would keep the status quo, and three others that would open more land to drilling. There are two new additions from the 2005 EIS. One of the alternatives, Wilson said, would allow even more drilling to north and east of Teshekpuk Lake, an area considered by environmentalists to be particularly sensitive. Also, three of the four alternatives would allow oil and gas companies to suggest ways of preserving the environment while developing their leases. Their suggestions would be evaluated by government scientists.

This approach, called "performance-based stipulations," puts the onus on companies to find ways to mitigate their activities while also affording them more latitude, Wilson said.

The agency will solicit comments on the proposal until October 24.

Wilson said BLM staff who review submitted comments look for information and arguments that bureau researchers might have missed, not simply statements of support or opposition to the plan.

Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity called BLM's proposals "the same old plan, repackaged."

Cumming's organization was a plaintiff in the 2006 case, and he said that while more analysis had been done, it seems to be incidental to the final options BLM presented. These were virtually the same, he said, and he called the lack of a preferred alternative "disingenuous." The 2005 choice, which would remove a ban on drilling on 13% of the northeastern NPR-A including the Teshekpuk Lake area, is still on the menu.

Cummings said his organization would consider suing again if BLM proposed the same land use plan. "BLM as an agency has a serious learning disorder. No matter how many times the courts tell them not to do something, they come back and do it again," he said.

Eleanor Huffines of The Wilderness Society's Alaska office echoed Cummings' criticisms that BLM had not allowed its research to inform its land use proposals. If the bureau had, she said, it would have come to the conclusion that more protection for areas like the Teshekpuk area is appropriate.

As for the performance-based stipulations, Huffines said "we don't have a lot of faith that BLM won't do anything at all a company requests." She said BLM handed out exemptions to environmental stipulations with little or no review, and did not even retain the scientists to scrutinize industry actions.

With so much of the NPR-A already open for production, she said there was no reason not to leave areas like Teshekpuk, which is an important waterfowl molting area, under a moratorium. "We just want some balance," she said.

Richard Ranger of the American Petroleum Institute said his organization supports the alternative that calls for as much production in NPR-A as possible.

He said that the industry was ready to accept stringent guidelines in exchange for access to the 9.3 billion barrels of oil in the NPR-A.

He himself worked in production in Prudhoe Bay, located about 100 miles from the reserve, and said the landscape was "pockmarked with tundra ponds full of waterfowl," despite heavy traffic and drilling. In NPR-A, he said, seasonal restrictions prevent industry from being present during the summer, so wildlife and oil producers are unlikely to be there at the same time.

"We feel there is a strong body of experience to show that oil and gas exploration and production can coexist without doing damage to wildlife," Ranger said.