

## **Environment News Service**

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### **Shell's Chukchi Sea Drill Plan OK'd Despite Pending Lawsuit**

**WASHINGTON, DC**, December 9, 2009 (ENS) - The federal Minerals Management Service has approved a controversial plan by Shell Gulf of Mexico, Inc. to drill up to three exploratory wells in the Chukchi Sea on leases it purchased in 2008.

"A key component of reducing our country's dependence on foreign oil is the environmentally-responsible exploration and development of America's renewable and conventional resources," said Ken Salazar Tuesday. As Secretary of the Interior, he has jurisdiction over the Minerals Management Service.

Pointing out that the Houston-based Shell subsidiary paid \$2.1 billion for its leases during Chukchi Sea Oil and Gas Lease Sale 193, Salazar said, "By approving this Exploration Plan, we are taking a cautious but deliberate step toward developing additional information on the Chukchi Sea."

The 2008 sale was included in the Bush administration's 2007-2012 Five-Year Oil and Gas Leasing Program to cover leasing for oil and gas in the Outer Continental Shelf. The Exploration Plan now approved allows Shell to drill up to three exploration wells during the July-October open water drilling season.

Approval of the Chukchi drilling plan follows recent approval by Minerals Management Service of Shell's plans to drill in the adjacent Beaufort Sea in 2010.

In the Chukchi Sea, Shell proposes using one drill ship, one ice management vessel, an ice class anchor handling vessel, and oil spill response vessels.

The closest proposed drill site is about 60 miles from shore and 80 miles from Wainwright, a community of about 546 people on the Chukchi coast.

Salazar said his department will keep a wary eye on Shell's treatment of the environment. "Our approval of Shell's plan is conditioned on close monitoring of Shell's activities to ensure that they are conducted in a safe and environmentally responsible manner," the secretary said. "These wells will allow the department to develop additional information and to evaluate the feasibility of future development in the Chukchi Sea."

But a coalition of conservation groups and the tribal government of Point Hope, Alaska object that the Minerals Management Service approved Shell's exploratory drilling plan without a full analysis of its effects on wildlife and Alaska Native subsistence, already threatened by climate change, and despite a lack of fundamental scientific information about the region.

Caroline Cannon, president of the Native Village of Point Hope, said Tuesday, "The proposed oil and gas activities affect the very foundations of who we are as individuals and as a people. We have a right to life, to physical integrity, to security, and the right to enjoy the benefits of our culture. For this, we will fight; we just hope not to die as a people during the process." **Moon over the Native Village of Point Hope, January 2008. (Photo by [Rebecca Noblin](#))**

The Native Village of Point Hope is a federally recognized tribal government and community of about 670 people located near the tip of Point Hope peninsula, a gravel spit that forms the western-most extension of the northwest Alaska coast.

The MMS approved the drilling although the government has not yet resolved legal problems with the Bush-era five year leasing plan that opened the Arctic Ocean seabed to oil and gas activities.

"Oil and gas development is spreading rapidly across the Arctic," said Earthjustice attorney Erik Grafe. "Before moving forward we need to develop the missing science about the Arctic Ocean and the impacts of drilling and a better comprehensive plan for protection of the Arctic."

Last spring, a federal court of appeals in Washington, DC found this Bush administration plan was illegal because it downplayed the environmental sensitivity of the very area where Shell wants to drill.

A separate legal action is pending in the Alaska federal district court that challenges the Bush administration decision to sell to Shell the oil and gas leases in the Chukchi Sea on which it plans to drill under the MMS approval granted Monday. The Obama administration is still contemplating its position in that challenge.

"MMS's approval of Shell's drilling plan before it addresses these underlying legal questions puts the cart before the horse," said David Dickson, Western Arctic and Oceans program director at Alaska Wilderness League. "It may prejudice its reconsideration of the Bush-era decisions to open these areas to oil and gas activities without first gathering missing information and putting in place a science-based management plan."

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed that the very areas in which Shell proposes to drill be designated as critical habitat for polar bears listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

**Rebecca Noblin on the shore of the Chukchi Sea, January 2008. (Photo courtesy [Rebecca Noblin](#))**

"The rapid expansion of industrial oil development in America's Arctic could be the final nail in the coffin for struggling polar bears," said Rebecca Noblin, staff attorney at Center for Biological Diversity. "It is time for the Obama administration to break from destructive Bush-era drill policies and give the iconic polar bear a fighting chance of survival."

The conservation groups point out that Shell's drilling would take place along a key migratory route for the endangered bowhead whale - a critical subsistence source of food for the Inupiat people.

"This is one of the riskiest areas on the planet to drill," said Whit Sheard, Alaska program director at Pacific Environment. "Although traditional indigenous communities, the courts, and the global scientific community have all condemned this plan, the Arctic continues to be treated like a sacrifice zone."

The groups contend that the exploratory drilling would "generate industrial noise in the water while emitting tons of pollutants into the air and thousands of barrels of waste into the water."

"We don't need to put our seas and marine life at risk," said Dan Ritzman, Alaska program director for Sierra Club. "Instead of drilling for more dirty oil, we can shift to clean energy that will create jobs, combat global warming, and keep our wildlife and wild places intact."

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