

Arctic drilling opponents gain momentum from Gulf oil spill

Exploratory drilling is scheduled for July in the waters off Alaska's northern shore. Environmental groups, reeling from the Gulf of Mexico BP oil spill, are fighting to put those plans on hold.

By MARK CLAYTON

Staff writer

As the federal government and BP struggle to bring the massive Gulf of Mexico oil spill under control, a battle over drilling in arctic water off Alaska's northern shore is heating up fast.

While most eyes remain glued on the Gulf of Mexico's Deepwater Horizon blowout and its massive oil slick, some are turning to the northern shore of Alaska where a rig called Frontier Discoverer and support ships are now headed to begin exploratory drilling for Royal Dutch Shell in the Beaufort Sea in July.

It was drilling in deep water that led to the BP blowout and environmental catastrophe now embroiling the Gulf, a disaster critics say would be many times worse were it to happen in the icy waters and often ferocious winter conditions of the arctic.

Exploratory drilling has not occurred in Alaska's northern waters since the 1990s. Today there is just one production well - owned by BP - that is actually sitting on a manmade island - not in open water.

Has the federal government taken steps to ensure that the Frontier Discoverer will not be the next Deepwater Horizon? Residents of native village Point Hope, just 20 miles from one of the drill sites, say it definitely has not.



On the frozen Beaufort Sea outside the Inupiat village of Kaktovik, Alaska a polar bear takes a break from gnawing on whale meat in this 2006 file photo. A fight to limit exploratory oil drilling off Alaska's northern shore is heating up following last month's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

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"We're worried," says Caroline Cannon, president of the village, in a phone interview. "We don't want to see what happened in the Gulf happen to us - with all the ice in our waters it would be a much bigger nightmare to clean up."

On Thursday lawyers for Point Hope natives and about a dozen environmental groups will argue before the US Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit in Portland, Ore. that Shell was never required by the Minerals Management Service (MMS) of the Department of Interior to develop plans

for handling a big spill or blowout in the arctic. The court is expected to issue an accelerated judgment on the case in the next few weeks.

In approving Shell's plans, the MMS adopted Shell's conclusion that "a large oil spill, such as a crude oil release from a blowout, is extremely rare and not considered a reasonably foreseeable impact," the Center for Biological Diversity will argue in court, according to a statement.

The agency concluded that a large spill was "too remote and speculative

an occurrence” to warrant analysis, environmental groups said in a May 5 letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar asking him to refuse to grant final permits needed for drilling.

A spokesman for the Department of Interior would not comment on the case. Shell is confident their case is a strong one. “The permit granted to us is quite robust and we expect that MMS will be successful in defending it,” said Curtis Smith, a spokesman for Shell Alaska, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell.

Still, there’s little question that Shell’s quest to drill in the arctic this year could be halted by the federal government if it chooses to deny a few critical permits sought by the company.

Indeed, the Obama Administration had seemed last week to make it clear: “No additional drilling has been authorized and none will until we find out what happened here and whether there was something unique and preventable here,” Obama senior adviser David Axelrod told TV interviewers.

But awaiting the results of an investigation may not apply to Shell.

“We are moving forward with plans for drilling because we have not been told otherwise,” says Mr. Smith.

When President Obama announced his new oil drilling policy for the Outer Continental Shelf [OCS] in mid-April, just before the Deep Horizon blowout, he placed key Alaska waters – like the sensitive Bristol Bay – off limits.

But he left the door open for further oil exploration, including leases Shell purchased in 2008 during the Bush Administration to drill in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas - a critical feeding area for polar bears and a migratory route for Bowhead whales and myriad other species.

In making that exception, however, Secretary Salazar is requiring the US Geological Survey and MMS to identify gaps in scientific knowledge about arctic drilling that could impact future lease sales. That report is due in October.

In the near term, newly ordered safety reviews now being conducted will be considered, writes Julie Rodriguez, deputy press secretary at the Department of Interior in an e-mail.

“Secretary Salazar’s review of safety issues on the [outer continental shelf] that President Obama ordered will help guide the Department’s decisions on whether to approve Shell’s applications for permits to drill for the five exploration wells they are proposing,” she wrote. That report is due at the end of the month.

The department has established a new board to examine safety procedures for offshore drilling, and Salazar has been ordered to provide President Obama with a report by early next month, she notes.

Earlier this week, environmental groups filed regulatory appeals with the Environmental Protection Agency’s Environmental Review Board over air pollution permits granted to Shell in April. The groups say the EPA looked only at air pollution emitted by the drilling rig – not by the half dozen or more other ships that will be sitting beside it.

Shell’s Smith, however, notes that most of those ships – including an empty oil tanker – are there to swoop in and gather up oil should any spill occur. He cites backup ships for that group – and “ice rated booms” that could keep oil from spreading. Ice has been found to be a “natural barrier” to spreading oil – and the cold water would keep oil intact and make it easier to burn, if necessary.

“We’re prepared for the worst,” he says, noting that the extreme subsurface pressure that produced the blowout in the 5,000-foot-deep Gulf is much less likely in the relatively shallow arctic seas, which are just 130 to 150 feet deep.

But environmentalists say the MMS’s failure to require the company to explain what it would do in case of a blowout shows that’s not true. In icy conditions, oil would get under the ice making it impossible to clean up, they say

“The bottom line is there’s no effective way to clean up a spill in the arctic - and broken ice just aggravates the situation,” says Pamela Miller, arctic program director at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, an environmental group in Fairbanks. “Here we have a pristine area so important to natives, marine mammals, whales – and it hasn’t been assessed for what to do in the event of a major blowout.”

If a blowout occurred at the end of the season when pack ice was forming and the drill rig sank - as happened in the gulf - another rig would not be available to drill a relief well until the following season, she says.

On Wednesday, House and Senate Democrats unveiled legislation to block new offshore oil exploration nationwide until Gulf of Mexico oil spill investigations are complete, along with a report on ways to prevent future accidents.

“An immediate moratorium is the only way to go,” Rep. Kenrick Meek (D) of Florida said. Sen. Bill Nelson of Fla. pronounced President Obama’s offshore drilling plan “dead on arrival” and threatened a filibuster when it came up.