

Groups appeal EPA permit to Shell to burn diesel on board

By Ted Land

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Environmental groups and some North Slope residents say the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is proof that the federal government needs to do a better job of managing oil companies.

They're taking aim at Shell's plans to drill in the Arctic, asking the Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider a key permit that Shell needs to start drilling offshore.

An appeal must be filed before the groups can file a lawsuit.

Shell's Frontier Discoverer drill ship is ready to start searching for oil in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas.

But the groups are appealing the EPA permit that would allow Shell to burn diesel on board the drilling rig and other support vessels.

"This is a very large, industrial undertaking that is orders of magnitude greater than anything that has been previously seen in this area," said Eric Myers with Audubon Alaska.

The groups say the current permit is not strict enough, and worry that it would allow Shell to spew large quantities of black carbon and greenhouse gas into the Arctic air.

The groups seeking appeal include the Alaska Wilderness League, Audubon, the Sierra Club and a single Native village, Point Hope

The appeal asks the EPA to insist that Shell use the best available technology to reduce emissions across the entire drilling operation. The company says it already is.

"We're using ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel on all of our marine vessels and a lot of that's voluntary, so we're trying to have the smallest possible footprint in the Arctic," Shell spokesperson Curtis Smith said.

The groups seeking appeal say their challenge was in the works long before the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, but they say the timing is noteworthy.

"Certainly there's a larger concern that the federal government isn't doing its job in regulating the offshore



The groups say they had organized the appeal before the disastrous spill in Louisiana, but that it highlights that government regulations are not doing enough.

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oil industry as well as it should, and I think what we're seeing in the Gulf now really brings that home," said Rebecca Noblin with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The EPA has said Shell's drilling program meets all health-based air quality standards.

"We think the permit that we received is quite robust and we expect it to prevail through the appeals process," Smith said.

If it does, Shell could drill as early as this summer.