

Group sues Interior Department for giving Shell drilling permits

by **Lori Tipton**

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- An environmental group is threatening to sue the federal government over allowing off shore drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas.

The Center for Biological Diversity says that when Interior Secretary Ken Salazar handed out permits to Shell Oil, he failed to consider the impacts of a possible oil spill on threatened and endangered species.

"Under the Endangered Species Act, the federal government has to ensure that any projects it carries out or funds don't jeopardize the continued existence of threatened and endangered species," said Rebecca Noblin with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Noblin says the Arctic is home to several threatened and endangered species, including polar bears and bowhead whales. She says Salazar failed to consider those animals when he gave Shell the drilling permits.

In his approval for the plans, Salazar said, "A large oil spill, such as a crude oil release from a blowout, is

extremely rare and not considered a reasonably foreseeable impact."

The threat of the lawsuit is timely considering the major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Noblin says that spill is a good example that accidents can happen during exploratory off shore drilling.

"Clearly accidents happen and clearly this technology is not as state-of-the art as the oil companies are saying and it's time for the federal government to stop letting the oil companies run the show and really take a stronger hand," she said.

Those with the Alaska oil industry say drilling that's happening in the Gulf of Mexico is very different than what will be done off the coast of Alaska.

"It's unfair to compare what's going to happen in the off shore of Alaska to what happened in the Gulf of Mexico," said Kara Moriarty, the deputy director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association. "They are two completely different projects; they're two completely different regions."

Moriarty says federal agencies have



The Center for Biological Diversity says polar bears and bowhead whales are just two of the species that could be affected.

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examined the off shore projects in Alaska very carefully and believe the projects can be done safely.

"Companies have spent billions of dollars to have the right to go look for what's out there and we believe they should be allowed to have their exploration work done this summer," she said.

The notice of intent to sue will last 60 days. This threat of a lawsuit comes a day after environmental groups and a Native village announced they are asking the Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider a key permit Shell Oil needs in order to drill in the Arctic.