

## Tracking big oil: National environmental groups challenge federal investigation of Arctic researcher Charles Monnett

### Federal regulators say scientists integrity and contracting are at the basis of the investigation

by Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — Two national environmental groups have formally requested a full investigation into the suspension of Dr. Charles Monnett, an Arctic researcher who has been the subject of an ongoing investigation by the Department of Interior Inspector General.

Monnett works for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, the federal agency that permits offshore drilling. During a research project several years ago, Monnett saw drowned polar bears in the Arctic Ocean and later published an article on his observations.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Greenpeace say they are looking for documents that might show whether Monnett was the subject of correspondence between the agency and Shell Oil, which last week won approval for a controversial plan to drill in the coastal water of the Beaufort Sea.

Monnett's circumstances were brought to light by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a watchdog and whistle-blower protection group. Memos and other documents



Who's in charge of Arctic science? PHOTO COURTESY USGS/STEVEN AMSTRUP

suggest that the investigation of Monnett focused on his polar bear research.

The group has accused BOEMRE of trying to muzzle Monnett, but officials say the investigation is related to integrity issues, and to Monnett's handling of scientific contracting duties.

In a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and White House Science Chief Dr. John Holdren, Greenpeace and the Center for Biological Diversity also suggest that Monnett's treatment smacks of political interference.

"Dr. Monnett appears to be the subject of precisely the type of disgraceful political

interference that President Obama promised to end,” said Kassie Siegel, director of the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute. “This incident will further chill agency scientists from speaking about and publishing their research. Unfortunately, the Interior Department today appears to be as dysfunctional and beholden to the oil industry as it was under the Bush administration.”

Kert Davies, Greenpeace research director, said, “The Bush administration leaned on scientists who didn’t toe the line and suppressed important work to help out the oil industry. The current president has tried to fix that, but the signs are that this agency is falling back into bad habits. It’s time for a full and open inquiry to reassure the public that science, not corporate greed, is driving our national energy debate.”

The letter stated that the incident shows BOEMRE “determined to restrict scientists from engaging in or disseminating research that provides critical information on the potential impacts of oil drilling in a rapidly changing Arctic.”

As a senior scientist at BOEMRE, Monnett was responsible for conducting and coordinating crucial research on the distribution of marine mammals. Such research is conducted to produce baseline data against which to judge the potential impacts of proposed oil drilling.

Last week, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed a formal complaint against BOEMRE on Monnett’s behalf for the actions taken against him.