

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Shell Oil gets Arctic offshore drilling OK from BOEMRE

By Jill Burke

On Thursday the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) approved a 2012 Beaufort Sea exploratory drilling plan for Shell Offshore, Inc., a decision long awaited by the oil company, which saw its plans put on hold in the regulatory aftermath of the Gulf of Mexico's Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April 2010.

"The conditional approval of our Plan of Exploration is welcome news and adds to our cautious optimism that we will be drilling our Alaska leases by this time next year," said Curtis Smith, a spokesperson for Shell's Alaska operations.

Meanwhile, drilling opponents who maintain too little is known about the Arctic marine environment and of the ability to clean up an oil spill in the region, are not pleased.

"This announcement is proof that all of Secretary Salazar's promises of reform after the Deepwater Horizon disaster amount to nothing. This Administration is as willing as ever to rubber stamp dangerous drilling plans in the Arctic Ocean," said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity.



"We base our decisions regarding energy exploration and development in the Arctic on the best scientific information available," BOEMRE Director Michael R. Bromwich said in a prepared statement about the approval of Shell's permit. "We will closely review and monitor Shell's proposed activities to ensure that any activities that take place under this plan will be conducted in a safe and environmentally responsible manner."

Shell's plans in the Beaufort Sea call for drilling up to four exploratory wells over two years. The company is also pursuing drilling along Alaska's western Arctic Coast in the Chukchi Sea under a separate permit.

"Shell has taken extraordinary steps to build confidence around our exploration program. We stand ready to deploy the most robust Arctic oil spill response system known to industry and, in accordance with the BOEMRE's

requirements, Shell has shown that our oil spill response capability exceeds our calculated worst-case discharge volume for the wells being proposed," Smith said.

Precautions Shell is pursuing include designing an "oil spill capping system, which is designed to capture hydrocarbons at the source in the extremely unlikely event of a shallow water blowout," according to Smith.

Shell's drilling plan is not, however, entirely free from potential obstacles. Before any drilling takes place, the permit from BOEMRE requires Shell to also obtain permits from the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

In making its permitting decision, "BOEMRE found no evidence that the proposed action would significantly affect the quality of the human environment," according to a press release from the agency, which notes it relied in part on new information about energy development in the Arctic released in a June 2011 report from the U.S. Geological Survey.

