

Rolling Stone

Shell's Arctic Drilling Plan: Another Disaster Waiting to Happen

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Harry Gerwin/Getty Images

The Interior Department has greenlighted Royal Dutch Shell's exploration plans for off-shore drilling in the Arctic Ocean after finding "no evidence" that a potential spill larger than the Exxon Valdez will "significantly affect the quality of the human environment." The decision is premised on the oil company's fantastical claims that it will be capable of recovering 90 percent of any oil that hits the water after a Gulf-style blowout.

Shell is now on track to begin Arctic drilling by next July, pending final permitting and (most likely) fierce litigation.

When BP's DeepWater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico last spring, Royal Dutch Shell had been poised to begin drilling in the Arctic. But the dangers of extreme oil exploration laid bare by the catastrophe made the plan politically untenable, at least in the short term. Interior suspended the issuance of Arctic drilling permits at the same time as it placed a moratorium on deepwater permitting for the Gulf.

Opponents of Arctic oil exploration I interviewed at the time feared that the administration's move was just for optics, and that Interior Secretary Ken Salazar remained committed to getting Shell into the frigid waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas as soon as public outrage subsided. Today, that cynicism appears to have been well-founded.

As I reported in Rolling Stone a year ago, drilling in the Arctic is far more perilous than drilling in temperate southern waters:

There's no proven technology for cleaning up oil in icy water, which can render skimming boats useless – much less able to cope with a gusher under the ice. In the worst-case scenario, according to marine scientists, a blowout that takes place in the fall,

when the seas are freezing over, oil could flow unabated until relief wells could be drilled the following summer.

Shell's just-approved exploration plan does not account for this kind of months-long catastrophe. Its worst-case scenario describes an uncontrolled blowout in lasting just 43 days, resolved by the arrival of another ship, unimpeded by sea ice, to drill a relief well.

Even so, Shell admits that a massive amount of oil would be released into the environment: 400,000 barrels into the Beaufort Sea, or one-and-a-half times the amount of crude spilled by the Exxon Valdez, in 1989. Shell insists, however, that only a small fraction of that – 10 percent – would remain in the environment. “During these 43 days, it is possible that 40,712 [barrels] of oil would escape primary efforts using mechanical recovery.”

Leave aside for a moment the question of how Interior could conclude that even a spill of 40,000 barrels of oil would not “significantly affect” the human environment. Shell is telling the government it can recapture 90 percent of any oil that hits the water. Based on past experience, that claim is “absolutely ridiculous,” says Rebecca Noblin, Alaska Director for the Center for Biological Diversity. Only 5 percent of oil from the BP disaster was recovered; Exxon Valdez was marginally better: 8 percent.

Rolling Stone contacted Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE), and spokeswoman Melissa Schwartz replied via email with opaque and legalistic answers.

Regarding Shell's science-defying 90 percent oil-recovery claim, Schwartz wrote, “they will have to demonstrate their subsea containment and response capabilities, which will include verifying any statements regarding capture statistics.” BOEMRE has also requested that Shell document how it would respond to the “potential presence of sea ice” during its containment efforts.

This approve-then-verify approach to exploration plans appears starkly at odds with BOEMRE director Michael Bromwich's insistence last week that “[w]e base our decisions regarding energy exploration and development in the Arctic on the best scientific information available.”

Indeed, it suggests that, despite the bureaucratic reshuffling required to create BOEMRE in the wake of the BP disaster, the ethos of the oil companies know best remains entrenched at the former Minerals Management Service. Chuck Clusen, director of Alaska projects for the Natural Resources Defense Council, describes Interior's approval of Shell's plans “either the height of irresponsibility or the height of ignorance — but either way it should be stopped.”