

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

No Arctic science ‘silver bullet’

By Patti Epler

A long-awaited federal report released Thursday points to numerous holes in scientific knowledge about the Arctic that could shed important light on how oil and gas development would affect the area.

Now, the question is: what will anyone do with it?

The 272-page document will undoubtedly end up in court, on one side or the other, as legal battles over Arctic development continue. Whether the report’s numerous recommendations will be followed remains to be seen.

Already the Interior Department is under a court order to finish an environmental impact study of the Chukchi Sea -- where Shell Oil, ConocoPhillips and Statoil want to work next summer -- by Oct. 3. Shell says it needs certainty about its permits by then, and Congress is putting political



pressure on the White House to issue permits more quickly so companies can get to work.

The report by the U.S. Geological Survey is a detailed compilation of decades of research on everything from the biology to the geology to the oceanography of the Alaska Outer Continental Shelf and how what’s known -- and not known -- is important to decisions on whether to allow industrial development. It looks at the impacts of climate change, felt especially in the

Arctic, and where “energy activities may exacerbate those changes unless careful analysis of risks and tradeoffs is conducted.”

Beyond climate politics, more Arctic science critical

But, the report said, it’s clear that “more than science is needed” to get beyond the politically charged debate over oil development in the Arctic. To that end, the report, lays out a “structured decision making process” that it encourages Interior Department officials to follow.

“While there is a growing base of scientific and technical information for the Arctic ... (and) critical science gaps to be addressed, many of the challenges emerging in Arctic oil and gas development decision making are beyond the ability of science alone to resolve,” the report concluded. “There is no ‘silver bullet.’”

The report was requested in March 2010 by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to determine what science gaps exist when it comes to deciding whether to allow exploration and drilling in the Alaska OCS, particularly the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. It was delayed by the Gulf of Mexico Deepwater Horizon blowout and oil spill that killed 11 people in April 2010.

In releasing the report Thursday, Salazar was noncommittal about what role it would play in looming permitting decisions. Industry and its supporters have accused the White House of following an environmental agenda to prevent any Arctic oil development; environmental groups are just as critical of the Obama administration for moving ahead with development when there are questions over the ability to clean up an oil spill and risks to threatened and endangered species.

“To make responsible decisions, we need to understand the environmental and social consequences of development and plan accordingly,” Salazar said in a press release. “This study is helpful in assessing what we know and will help inform determinations about what we need to know to develop our Arctic energy resources in the right places in the right way.”

The report promises to be a political and legal football as the debate over offshore drilling continues.

Shell Oil Alaska spokesman Curtis Smith said the report “goes a long way in validating what we have believed all along: that a significant scientific record exists in the Arctic and that we are well-positioned to add to it.”

He said industry has provided much of the information in the report over the past 30 years. Shell alone has spent \$60 million in the last four years gathering baseline data and plans to continue adding to the knowledge base.

“The fact that Shell is adding multiple years of site-specific, comprehensive studies to the existing record should give the public confidence that we are well-positioned to explore the

Arctic in an environmentally responsible way,” he said.

But environmental groups pointed to section after section that discusses the lack of information about key issues, including the concern that not enough information is known about what would happen to the environment and the creatures that live there if there were a serious oil spill.

“It pretty unequivocally states that there are major science gaps in terms of what we know about the Arctic and what oil development would do to the Arctic,” said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity. “It’s a long report that essentially says the obvious -- there’s a lot we don’t know, and certainly we can’t have any confidence we could respond to an oil spill.”

An Arctic roadmap?

Mike LeVine, Pacific senior counsel for Oceana, said he expects the administration to use the report to guide development in the Alaska OCS in the future, although it’s unclear how it will play in permit decisions that are currently in the works, some of them started under the Bush administration.

“It is our hope as an ocean organization that the road map that’s provided in this report is followed,” he said, “and that the science that’s called for here is obtained before we forward.”

LeVine noted that earlier this year the National Oil Spill Commission also raised concerns about the industry’s ability to respond to a spill in the Arctic. That report and the new USGS report should be taken together and factored into any decision that’s made on development in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, he said.

“We shouldn’t keep sticking our heads in the sand,” LeVine said.

Oceana, along with the Center for Biological Diversity, other environmental groups and the village of Point Hope, is involved in a lawsuit that overturned a federal lease sale in the Chukchi Sea. One of the reasons the sale was sent back for more review was because the court found that a lack of scientific information about the sale area had not been properly addressed. More recently, a federal judge has ordered the federal government to move more quickly on a new environmental impact

statement, and finish it by early October, in part to accommodate Shell’s drilling schedule.

“It’s not only contradictory to the USGS report but to the spill commission’s report and comments” submitted by other federal scientific agencies, LeVine said.

“In order to understand what happens if you put an icebreaker or a drilling rig in a particular place in the ocean, you have to know what’s there and how that might change,” he said.

Cummings predicts the Interior Department will green-light Shell’s development plans for the coming year despite the gaps in science detailed in the report. He expects the lawsuits will continue and that the USGS report will be Exhibit A in challenges to permits that the government might issue.

“This administration in general and the Department of the Interior in particular is so afraid of the oil industry and of seeming to be an impediment to oil development all signs are that Interior will approve oil drilling regardless of what this report had said,”

Cummings said. “If Salazar had a spine this report would be fully adequate reason to say no to Shell.”