

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Fearing 'Titanic' disaster, groups sue to stop Arctic offshore drilling

- Jill Burke

A large group comprised of Alaskan and Outside environmentalists took the U.S. government to court on Thursday over its recent decision to allow Shell Oil to drill next summer in the Beaufort Sea.

"After the devastating Deepwater Horizon spill, the Obama administration wisely delayed plans by Shell Oil to drill in the Arctic Ocean. But this August, the administration reversed course and approved the first part of the most aggressive Arctic drilling proposal in the history of the country by approving Shell's plans to start drilling in the Beaufort Sea as early as the summer of 2012," The Wilderness Society said in a press release about the lawsuit against the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement.

The groups don't believe Shell is adequately prepared to clean up an oil spill in the



Arctic, which would threaten to harm polar bears, whales, other sea life and the local hunters that rely on the ocean for sources of food.

"Our culture can never be bought or repaired with money. It is priceless," Caroline Cannon, President of the Native Village of Point Hope, said in a prepared statement.

Shell Oil spokesperson Curtis Smith offered a brief response from New Orleans.

"We believe BOEMRE was thorough in its analysis of our Revised Camden Bay

(Beaufort Sea) Exploration Plan and we remain confident the conditional approval our Plan will be upheld in Court, as it was in May of 2010," he said.

In addition to Earthjustice, which filed the suit, the coalition of plaintiffs includes the Native Village of Point Hope, Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Greenpeace, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Oceana, Pacific Environment,

REDOIL, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society.

Legal challenges are not uncommon to Shell or to emerging oil-industry projects. The company has faced opposition from drilling opponents at many phases of its path to new, exploratory drilling in the Arctic Ocean, including in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. It hopes to begin drilling – which was nearly launched but delayed last year following regulatory fallout from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico – in summer 2012.

.This summer, U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Robert Papp told Congress that the federal government has “zero” spill response capability in the Arctic.

An array of environmental groups lined up to criticize the risk of drilling offshore in the Arctic.

“Any oil company that wants to drill in the Arctic Ocean must demonstrate an ability to clean up oil spilled in these icy waters with proven technology,” said Cindy Shogan, Executive Director of

the Alaska Wilderness League. “Shell’s current oil spill plan is full of inadequacies and falsehoods.

“Given the risk of a catastrophic oil spill, the Obama administration should not allow Shell to play Russian roulette with the future of polar bears, Pacific walrus and the entire Arctic ecosystem,” said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska Director for Center for Biological Diversity.

“If you liked the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, you will love Shell’s plan for Alaska,” said Mike Daulton, Vice President of Government Relations at the National Audubon Society. “A major oil spill in Alaska would be Deepwater Horizon meets the Titanic.”