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Obama Courting Oil-spill Disaster in Arctic

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Think the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has been tough to clean up?

Well, wait till it happens in the Arctic. For much of the year, the Arctic seas are covered with ice and impassable for oil-spill response ships -- oil could gush unabated for up to eight months. The nearest Coast Guard facilities are 1,000 miles away, and any attempted cleanup would be hampered by ice, cold, hurricane-strength storms and blinding fogs.

Simply put, an offshore oil spill would spell disaster for pristine Arctic waters and for polar bears, bowhead whales, walrus, seals and other irreplaceable Arctic species.

And yet, that's exactly the gamble President Obama is asking the United States to take. He's poised to let Shell drill in the Arctic later this year -- unless, of course, he can be persuaded not to.

The Arctic Ocean has always been largely off limits to offshore oil drilling because the drilling is too risky. Even now, the Interior Department admits to the risks and lack of basic scientific knowledge about Arctic drilling impacts, while the Coast Guard says it lacks oil-spill response capabilities for a spill in the region's remote, icy waters.

Big Oil, though, soldiers on. Oil companies and their friends in Washington are putting all their weight behind a push to drill for oil in the Arctic's pristine frontier, and so far it's going swimmingly. Less than two years after the BP spill in the Gulf -- and in the face of our desperate need to curb global warming -- Mr. Obama is poised to expand drilling in both the Gulf and vast areas of the Arctic.

The government has already granted conditional permission for exploratory drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, and the administration has only a few final permitting decisions to make. Shell is determined to drill for oil in polar waters this summer.

But Obama has a crucial opportunity to keep the Arctic safe from oil spills.

His government has vowed not to let drilling proceed without a proper oil-spill preparedness plan. Well, such a plan is clearly not in place. Scientists know very little about how the Arctic Ocean functions or the ways in which this fragile marine ecosystem might respond to industrial activities. There's significant missing information about even the most basic parameters for every one of the largest and most conspicuous animals in this ecosystem -- including all fish, marine mammals and birds.

This fight, though, is about more than Arctic wildlife. Drilling the Arctic Ocean is a carbon bomb that will dramatically worsen the climate crisis. The U.S. offshore Arctic is estimated to contain upwards of 20 billion barrels of recoverable oil and more than 100 trillion cubic feet of gas. If these fossil fuels are extracted, refined and combusted, well over 11 billion metric tons of CO2 could be released into the atmosphere.

This massive release would come precisely at the moment scientists are telling us we must dramatically reduce carbon pollution.

There's also a terribly sad irony to drilling in the Arctic -- a place where climate impacts are being felt faster and more furiously than almost anywhere else. That irony is compounded by the fact that the Arctic's melting sea ice will make it easier to drill.

Remember when 12,000 people encircled the White House last fall to protest the Keystone XL? It's time to do the same to defend the Arctic. We have to tell Obama that drilling in the Arctic is far too risky, costly and dangerous. The Arctic, and all that depends on its pristine landscapes and a healthy climate, deserves a safer, saner future.