

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Shell clears another hurdle for offshore oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic

- Alex DeMarban

The Obama administration on Monday affirmed a controversial offshore oil lease sale, a key step in the process to allow drilling in the Arctic waters off Alaska.

Lease Sale 193, which was held in 2008, covered 2.8 million acres in the Chukchi Sea. But it's been held up in court after environmental and Alaska Native groups sued to stop it. Companies paid \$2.6 billion in bids, with Royal Dutch Shell and ConocoPhillips leading the way. The decision by U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is not permission to begin exploratory operations in the Chukchi Sea. Lots of permits designed to reduce risks will be required before drilling can occur in the lease sale areas, noted a statement from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management announcing the decision Monday.

"All of these leases are subject to a series of conditions to mitigate operational and environmental risks, including: protection of biological resources; orientation programs to familiarize personnel with environmental, social, and cultural issues; environmental requirements regarding the placement of pipelines; precautionary action to mitigate potential oil spill impacts; and measures to minimize the effects to Spectacled and Steller's eiders," said the statement from the Interior Department agency.

In a statement reacting to the news, Rebecca Noblin, of the Center for Biological Diversity, called the Obama administration an "an ostrich lost in the Arctic."

"Today, the Obama administration today buried its head in the snow," Noblin said in a statement. "Its

decision to open the Chukchi Sea to offshore drilling without first obtaining the basic data it needs to inform its decision threatens polar bears, whales, walrus, and the region's Alaska Native communities. The government should not compound this error by allowing Shell to start drilling next summer.

Curtis Smith, a Shell spokesman, said in a statement that the decision "clears the way for BOEMRE to conclude the review of Shell's Chukchi Sea Exploration Plan. We believe the Chukchi Plan we submitted in May of this year is technically and scientifically sound and we look forward to exploring this critical part of our Alaska portfolio in 2012."

