

Groups appeal air quality permit for Shell Arctic drilling

By Dan Joling

Environmental and Alaska Native groups on Wednesday appealed an air permit granted by the Environmental Protection Agency to a Shell Oil drilling ship that could be used this summer in the Arctic Ocean off Alaska's northern shore.

The groups claim the Kulluk and support vessels will put harmful pollutants into the skies, adding problems to a region already beset by climate warming, and that the EPA granted the permit without consideration of all national environmental laws and regulations.

"EPA did not analyze whether the Kulluk will comply with all standards, and they relied on modeling tricks to reduce the measured impact," Earthjustice attorney Colin O'Brien said.

The eight groups asked the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals to intervene and send the permit back to the EPA for reconsideration.

The appeal was expected. A similar appeal was filed for an air permit granted to a second Shell drilling ship, the Noble Discoverer.

The EPA Appeals Board last month rejected review petitions for the Kulluk and earlier had done the same for the Noble Discoverer. Shell Alaska spokesman Curtis Smith repeated that the company expects the permits to stand up to court review.

"The EPA finding of no significant impact to the Arctic air shed and the subsequent validation of that permit

by the EAB gives us a great deal of confidence that the permit, like the others we have achieved, will be upheld by the court," Smith said.

Shell plans to use the Noble Discoverer to drill three exploratory wells in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska's northwest coast. The company hopes to use the Kulluk to drill a pair of exploratory wells in the Beaufort Sea off Alaska's north coast.

The presence of two drill ships, according to the company, means that if there's a blowout, a backup vessel would be on hand to drill a relief well.

Drilling in Arctic waters is bitterly opposed by environmental groups and some Alaska Native groups, who contend oil skimmers and other mechanical cleanup devices will not work in waters that contain ice, from slush to icebergs.

They also fault the government for allowing drilling in a region with some of the harshest weather in the country and without basic infrastructure. Alaska's northern coastlines lack deep-water ports. The nearest permanent Coast Guard facility is in Kodiak, more than 1,000 miles away.

Shell in 2008 spent \$2.1 billion on Chukchi leases in a sale that environmental groups contend was illegal because the federal government had not performed required environmental studies.

The appeal Wednesday was filed by Earthjustice on behalf of Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Natural Resources Defense

Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Pacific Environment, Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands, Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society.

The groups say the Kulluk and support vessels will spew carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide and black carbon that will accelerate the loss of snow and sea ice., hurting both a fragile Arctic ecosystem that's home to endangered or threatened whales, polar bears and seals, and Alaska Native coastal communities that rely on the ocean for subsistence life.

Copyright 2012 . All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2012/05/16/2467373/groups-appeal-air-quality-permit.html#storylink=cpy>