



## Shell cleared to begin initial drilling in Beaufort

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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The Interior Department today approved Royal Dutch Shell PLC to begin preparatory drilling in the Beaufort Sea.

The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement permit for “top-hole” drilling -- in which the drill stops short of boring into oil-bearing rock -- follows approval late last month of limited drilling in the neighboring Chukchi Sea.

“BSEE has set the bar high for exploration activities in the Arctic, and any approved operations must meet those standards,” BSEE Director Jim Watson said in a statement.

“BSEE continues to closely monitor Shell’s ongoing approved preparatory drilling activities in the Chukchi Sea, and today’s approval of limited work in the Beaufort Sea must also meet the same rigorous safety, environmental protection and emergency response standards.”

Shell will be allowed to build a mud-line cellar that ensures a blowout preventer will be protected from sea ice. It is also authorized to drill and set the first two strings of casing, stopping short of oil-bearing rocks. Similar activities were approved in the Chukchi.

No activities may occur until Alaska Natives finish their fall whale hunt, BSEE said.

Shell had originally planned to complete five wells this summer but scaled back plans amid significant delays from lingering sea ice and difficulty certifying its oil spill response vessel.

The company on Sunday announced it would forgo oil drilling this summer and instead drill as many top holes as it could to get a head start on the 2013 season.

### Environmentalists slammed Interior’s decision.

“Letting Shell do top-hole drilling and other preparatory activities when they are clearly not ready to respond to an oil spill is like telling a drunk driver that as long as he stays off the freeway, everything should be OK,” said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “It’s bad policy and unnecessarily puts Arctic wildlife and people at risk.”

Critics point to a handful of Shell gaffes this summer, including damage to its oil spill containment dome, the unplanned drifting of its Noble Discoverer drillship close to the Alaskan shore and its inability to satisfy U.S. EPA air permit requirements.

