

Shell Gets Final Arctic Drilling Permit, Heads for Chukchi Sea

SustainableBusiness.com News

Some sobering news from Alaska. The US Department of the Interior (DOI) has given Shell clearance to begin exploratory oil drilling in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska, but the chances it can complete a well this year are slim.

Under the terms of its existing permits, [Shell's drilling in the Chukchi Sea must end by September 24, because that is when the area will begin to freeze over again](#). The company is ready to begin preparatory work next week with the Noble Discoverer drilling rig, [reports Bloomberg](#).

It typically takes about 20 days to complete a well, so Shell has requested an extension, which it is yet to receive.

The permit it received this week lets Shell drill down to 1,400 under the Chukchi seabed, but the company still needs approval from the US Coast Guard for its oil-containment barge before it can dig farther down into oil reservoirs that are about 4,000 deeper than that.

US Coast Guard officials have repeatedly said that the resources for cleaning up an oil spill in the Arctic Ocean don't exist. A coalition of environmental groups represented by Earthjustice filed a lawsuit last month challenging the government's approval of Shell's oil spill response plan for that reason.

"It is disappointing that our government continues to bend over backward to accommodate a company that is still not ready to drill," Michael LeVine, senior counsel for Washington-based group Oceana, told Bloomberg in an e-mail. "There is no price tag on the Arctic. No matter how much money the company spends or how many vessels it mobilizes, Shell should not be allowed put the Arctic Ocean at risk."

The DOI plans to scrutinize the activity closely, says Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

Bloomberg reports: "We are holding Shell's feet to the fire," Salazar said during a conference call yesterday. We don't even know if there is going to be exploration."

Shell still hasn't received the go-ahead to begin exploration in the Beaufort Sea. If it does, its drilling deadline there is October 31.

The Center for Biological Diversity was among the first environmental groups to condemn the Obama administration's decision to allow the drilling, noting that 1 million people have petitioned against it.

"By opening the Arctic to offshore oil drilling, President Obama has made a monumental mistake that puts human life, wildlife and the environment in terrible danger. The harsh and frozen conditions of the Arctic make drilling risky, and an oil spill would be impossible to clean up," says Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Scariest of all, the Obama administration is allowing Shell to go forward without even having the promised oil-spill containment equipment in place."

The very real safety dangers have been continually overlooked in the permitting process. The oil-spill containment ship needed to begin is still in Washington state, and the Noble Discoverer has had its own mishaps: [in July it slipped its moorings and almost ran aground](#).

"While opposition to Shell's drilling plans has resulted in significant safety improvements, Arctic drilling can never really be safe.

The president is putting America's natural heritage on the line just to add to Shell's *bottom* line," says Noblin. "Make no mistake: Once we've ruined the Arctic for wildlife, we'll never get it back. The unique animals that evolved over millions of years to survive in this frozen wilderness — and nowhere else — will be condemned to extinction."