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# Conservation groups battling federal government over Hilcorp's Liberty offshore oil project

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By: **Joe Vigil**

A fight over President Donald Trump's approval of Hilcorp Alaska's offshore oil project in the Beaufort Sea took place Tuesday in a federal courtroom in Portland, Oregon.

Several conservation groups are challenging the approval of Hilcorp's plans for a nine-acre artificial island for oil development. The proposed island would be located about five miles off the coast not far from Prudhoe Bay. It would be the first oil and gas facility approved in federal waters off Alaska.

On Tuesday, both sides presented oral arguments to a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit.

Conservation groups are critical of efforts to protect polar bear habitat. Judges wanted to know about the impact to polar bears with other projects in the area.

"Polar bears are declining so rapidly because of climate change, historical information on impacts to polar bears is only of limited significance in determining the impacts to polar bears now and over the next 25 years," said Earthjustice attorney Rebecca Noblin in court.

A lawyer representing the respondents said the federal government has a long track record of carefully managing the impacts of the oil and gas industry on polar bears.

"This is not the first project in the Beaufort Sea. This isn't the first artificial gravel island. It isn't the first project like this. This is the seventh project like this. It just happens to be the first one in federal waters," said attorney for the respondents James Maysonett.

Respondents named in the lawsuit include former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Conservation groups filed the lawsuit last December. Petitioners include the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and Pacific Environment. The groups are represented by attorneys for Earthjustice and the Center for Biological Diversity.