

US blocks scientific report on Arctic environment

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The United States has prevented the full release of a major new assessment of the impact of oil and gas drilling in the Arctic region. The report had taken six years to compile and was produced by scientists working for the Arctic Council, an international body of which the US is a member.

The report, entitled “An Assessment of Oil and Gas in the Arctic,” was supposed to provide the most comprehensive study of the work being done by scientists from the eight countries that are members of the council (Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Finland and Iceland, as well as the US).

At the release of the report, on January 21 in Tromsø, Norway, scientists expressed “huge frustration” that US representatives had blocked the full disclosure of an objective, science-based attempt to manage the future exploitation of Arctic energy reserves. One of the report’s authors, speaking off the record, stated that the US government had prevented the publication of the document’s executive summary and had censored any “plain language conclusions.”

The report was commissioned to give a detailed picture of the impact of the oil and gas industry in the Arctic, a region that is estimated to hold up to a third of the world’s untapped hydrocarbons.

The Arctic Council’s web site explains the objective of the report:

“[T]o present a holistic assessment of the environmental, social and economic, and human health impacts of current oil and gas activities in the Arctic, and to evaluate the likely course of development of Arctic oil and gas activities and their potential impacts in the near future. The assessment offers a balanced and reliable document for decision makers in support of sound future management of oil and gas activities in the Arctic.”

In 2002, Arctic Council Ministers called for collaboration on an assessment of the oil and gas industry in the region, organised by its Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme. Between 2004 and 2007, scientific and economic experts from Arctic countries, representatives from indigenous peoples’ organisations, and the oil and gas industry participated in the preparation of the scientific assessment.

The report contains chapters covering: oil and gas industry

activities; the socioeconomic impacts of the industry; the affect of hydrocarbon extraction on the environment; toxicity and organism-level impacts, including impacts on human health; and potential impacts to the ecosystem. Prior to publication, the report was presented to all members of the council, but conclusions drawn from these topics were removed under pressure from US representatives. The overall assessment and presentation of recommendations were also censored.

According to a draft of the culled recommendations seen by the British *Independent* newspaper, the authors of the report recommended that governments conduct proper research on environmental impacts before consenting to new oil and gas projects in the Arctic’s ecologically sensitive areas.

A leading Arctic Council scientist, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the key message of the report was for oil and gas exploitation to be carried out in a more careful way than at present, and to “check more before you drill for oil and gas in the Arctic.”

One of the scientists from the Arctic Council stated that the findings of the report were potentially embarrassing to the US and Russia in the Chukchi Sea, “where more research and assessment is needed” to fully understand the environmental implications of oil and gas drilling.

The Chukchi Sea, lying between Northwestern Alaska and Eastern Siberia, is estimated to hold 15 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 76 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. At the start of the year, the US federal Minerals Management Service said it would auction exploitation rights to 30 million acres of the American sector of the Chukchi Sea on February 6, earlier than previously indicated.

During a trip to Moscow in January, US Assistant Secretary of State Claudia McMurray held meetings with Russian government representatives to discuss the Arctic. There are indications that the two countries have reached some temporary agreement to cooperate over exploitation of Arctic resources, especially those under the Chukchi Sea. At a press conference in Moscow, McMurray stated that the talks were “not about Russia and the USA, but about all the five countries with borders towards the Arctic shelf.”

“It has become more obvious that we have to work together within all fields of joint interest—within oil, gas and tourism,”

she added.

The expansion of exploration rights in the Chukchi Sea is strongly supported by the Bush administration and Alaska's Republican governor, Sarah Palin. It is the first time in 15 years that Washington has invited oil companies to bid for new licenses in the area, a moratorium that came about largely due to massive public and scientific concerns about the threats posed to one of the Earth's last great wilderness areas.

It is widely acknowledged that the Chukchi sell-off has been brought forward in order to avoid a confrontation with Congress, which is currently preparing to add the polar bear to the list of animals protected under the Endangered Species Act, a move that would make it more difficult to allow oil and gas exploitation an area that is one of the creature's last secure habitats.

Even US government agencies have acknowledged that there is a 40 percent chance of an oil spill occurring in the Chukchi Sea if full commercial drilling takes place, and that contact with spilt oil is almost certainly fatal for polar bears and other rare species such as walrus.

Randall Luthi, director of the Minerals Management Service, has insisted that all environmental risks had been explored and taken into consideration. "We believe our decision is a good balance and will allow companies to explore this intriguing frontier area while still protecting the resources important to the coastal residents," he said. The agency claims that endangered mammals would be protected by a ban on drilling operations closer than 50 miles to shore.

However, a number of leading US-based and international Arctic conservation organisations have pointed out that no adequate measures exist to clean up an oil spill in icy seas.

Kassie Siegel, the climate director at the US-based Centre for Biological Diversity, has commented that the censorship of the Arctic Council report was typical of the actions of the Bush administration: "It fits a pattern of downplaying, denying, and suppressing climate science at every turn. It's all part of the Bush-Cheney strategy of handing out as many fossil fuel entitlements as quickly as they can in their final months in office."

Drilling for hydrocarbons in the Arctic has long been considered largely uneconomical by oil and gas companies due to the very high costs involved in mineral exploitation in the remote and harsh region. However, the current high cost of oil and gas combined with the retreating summer extent of the sea ice due to global warming have made the region increasingly attractive to the energy industry and the governments of the countries adjoining the Arctic.

This has produced a growing scramble for Arctic territory, expressed by a series of disputes over territorial rights. Rival claims to sovereignty over the North Pole by Russia and Denmark were intensified last year, with both countries engaged in high-profile campaigns to justify their positions. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the Arctic is vital to

Moscow's "strategic, economic, scientific and defence interests."

In recent years the US, Canada and Norway have also more aggressively pursued their territorial claims in the region. Ottawa has initiated the construction of eight armed Arctic patrol ships and established an army training base in Resolute, a small community less than 400 miles from the Pole. The US and Canada have longstanding disputes over control of the Arctic, especially over potentially lucrative shipping routes that could open up due to retreating sea ice.

Analysts have observed a shift in US policy on territorial claims over the Arctic. Washington has up to now rejected becoming a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the means by which rival claims over the seas, including the frozen Arctic Ocean, are decided. With the other northern powers increasingly vying for sovereignty over large swathes of the Arctic, Washington now appears to be willing to sign up in order to advance its own claims to the seabed north of Alaska.

The increased international tensions over the region were the topic of a recent seminar in the Swedish Parliament. Organised by several Swedish Arctic organisations, the meeting acknowledged that the fight for natural resources in the Arctic is getting tougher and urged that clearer international rules be established for oil and gas extraction.

"There are ecological and geopolitical risks in the Arctic. For these reasons agreement should be reached on the game rules for activities in the Arctic. For example, environmental standards should be drawn up," said Tomas Ries, director of the Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm.

Also at the seminar, Rune Fjellheim, secretary general of the Arctic Council's Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, said that the region's native peoples are insufficiently involved in decisions over the areas where they live and that many communities have been forced to abandon their homes because of the expansion of the energy industry.

Washington's suppression of the conclusions of the Arctic Council's report represents more than an attempt to rid itself of potentially embarrassing scientific findings. It also portends the breakdown of cooperation between the countries with claims over the Arctic and its vast mineral resources.



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