

Obama opens up delicate Alaska ecosystem for drilling

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The Obama administration has approved Shell Oil's plan to begin drilling for oil in the Beaufort Sea, off the Arctic Ocean coast of Alaska. This will be the first offshore drilling operation authorized in the region since the Gulf of Mexico catastrophe in April 2010. It only the latest example of the Obama administration's prostration before major oil interests.

Approval for drilling came from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE). The agency adopted the plan given to it by Shell Oil without even a cursory examination. Instead, it adopted an uncritical attitude towards the company, entrusting it not to violate safety regulations and risking a similar disaster to that which occurred last year.

The BOEMRE is also ignoring the ecological impact of the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989. When the oil tanker struck the Bligh Reef, it spilled somewhere between 42,000 and 120,000 cubic meters of crude into the Prince William Sound. This resulted in the deaths of as many as 250,000 seabirds and hundreds of sea otters, harbor seals and bald eagles, as well as four humans poisoned during the cleanup. The immediate economic impact was the loss of 26,000 jobs and \$2.4 billion.

In addition, the clean up efforts were not sufficient to completely eliminate oil. An NOAA report issued in 2007 revealed that, despite cleanup efforts, 26,000 gallons of oil still remain in the soil of the contaminated shoreline, impeding the repopulation of wildlife in the area. The amount of oil left in the ocean is unknown. Moreover, residents of the area who used to rely on fishing for subsistence are still wary of consuming local catches for fear of leftover oil.

The more recent explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon, which killed eleven workers, has left a much deeper scar. From April to June of 2010, the oil rig leaked 780,000 cubic meters of oil into the Gulf of

Mexico, contaminating almost 800 kilometers of coastline in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. Hundreds of thousands of fish, birds and other animals were affected, with thousands turning up dead. One estimate, given by Earth Economics, values the damage done at approximately \$1 trillion to the Mississippi River delta alone.

The cleanup efforts, controlled by BP, were an exercise in duplicity. Instead of forcing BP to pay the full amount in cleaning up the contaminated areas, the Obama administration allowed the company to set up a \$20 billion fund to compensate residents who were out of a livelihood because of the destruction of the Gulf's ecosystem. To date less than a quarter of the fund has been paid out.

The approval of Shell's Alaska drilling operation is setting the stage for a similar disaster. The BOEMRE-approved plan assumes that Shell Oil has the capacity to clean up 95 percent of all spilled oil with only mechanical devices, such as booms and skimmers. This flies in the face of all evidence that such measures are insufficient. These devices only cleaned up 8 percent of the Exxon Valdez spill and only 5 percent of the BP oil spill. These plans are also designed for the relatively warm conditions of August, not the icy weather of October when Shell Oil plans on drilling.

The environmental impacts of a spill would be catastrophic for the region. The Arctic Ocean is home to many species such as beluga whales, polar cod, arctic char, narwhal, seals, polar bears, and walrus, some of which are endangered species and already threatened with extinction by the impact of global warming.

The Obama administration's claims of only limited impact of drilling on the environment are disingenuous at best. A US Geological Survey (USGS) report issued

in June assessed the impact of the development of oil and gas industry in the region. The results pointed to a collective ignorance in the understanding of the Arctic Ocean ecosystem and the necessity to research the area further before disrupting everything with drill platforms.

In addition, it is known that Shell's plan to drill will disrupt the migration path of the bowhead whales, an endangered species. It will also impede movement to resting and feeding areas, which will harm the population, particularly mothers and calves.

"This is a disaster waiting to happen, but still BOEMRE is moving forward with Arctic Ocean drilling," said Earthjustice attorney Holly Harris. "Scientific integrity and government accountability took their familiar back seat to oil company profits and power today."

BOEMRE's approval of the Beaufort Sea drilling also ignores the extreme difficulty of responding to any crisis in the region. The Beaufort Sea is the part of the Arctic Ocean directly north of Alaska, where it is difficult to get large operations going the majority of the year, and more so during the fall and winter months when Shell wants to start drilling. Coast Guard Commandant Robert Papp admitted to Congress that the federal government has "zero" capability to respond to a spill in the Arctic.

An oil spill in the Beaufort Sea could also cause an international incident, considering that the sea border between the US and Canada in that region is still disputed.



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