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Shell's Alaska Oil Drilling Plan Draws New Scrutiny

By **WILLIAM YARDLEY**

ANCHORAGE — An ambitious plan to drill for oil off the northwest coast of Alaska has been moving ahead despite the spill in the Gulf of Mexico, but the project is now facing new questions from federal regulators.

Led by **Shell Oil**, the project has not been formally halted and could still begin exploratory drilling as early as this summer in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas.

In a letter late Thursday, the director of the United States **Minerals Management Service** asked the president of Shell, Marvin E. Odum, to provide more information about safety precautions for the project while the agency, part of the **Interior Department**, conducts an “expanded review” of permit applications “based on the Deepwater Horizon disaster.”

“We request that Shell provide detailed information with respect to additional safety procedures that the company is proposing to undertake in light of the Deepwater Horizon disaster,” wrote S. Elizabeth Birnbaum, the director of the Minerals Management Service.

Ms. Birnbaum asked Shell to provide the information by May 18.

In a separate statement, the Interior Department **said** a decision on the Alaska project and others would not be made until after the White House reviews a report on **offshore drilling** safety that the department is to file by May 28. Projects in California and Virginia have already been delayed.

A spokesman for Shell said the company would comply with the administration's request and try to "find new barriers and contingencies we can add to our existing plan." The spokesman, Curtis Smith, said the company still hoped to be able to drill this summer. Sue Libenson, who was executive director of the [Alaska Center for the Environment](#) during the [Exxon Valdez oil spill](#) in 1989, and has been part of a coordinated push to stop the Shell project, expressed concern that Shell would still be able to drill this summer.

"Suspending Arctic offshore drilling is the first real test if this administration is going to be serious about taking a step back and learning something," Ms. Libenson wrote in an e-mail message.

Since the gulf spill, dozens of environmental groups and several native Alaskan groups that have opposed the project for years have stepped up their efforts, writing to Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) and arguing against the project in federal appeals court this week in a long-scheduled hearing. The prospect of a disastrous spill in the forbidding Arctic has been at the core of their argument.

The sites in the Beaufort and Chukchi would be dozens of miles offshore in seas that experience some of the roughest storms and waves in North America. Groups opposed to the project have cited the region's constant winter darkness, ice and sheer remoteness. Native villages on the coast also worry about effects on the whale populations they hunt.

Shell fought back this week, saying that the opponents were deliberately misrepresenting the risks of the project to exploit public outrage over the gulf spill.

"Clearly no one wants to see oil in an ice environment," Pete Slaiby, vice president for Shell Alaska, said in an interview before the government raised new questions about the project. "But to suggest that it's an unworkable situation or game over is just not correct."

Shell has planned to begin exploratory drilling this summer using a ship-based drill that could begin making its way from the Philippines this month. It would be the first exploratory drilling in the area in many years. Actual oil production might not begin for another decade.

Shell and supporters of the project say it will have strict safeguards and pose fewer challenges than deep-water drilling in the gulf. Mr. Slaiby said that the sea floor was less than 150 feet

deep in most of the Alaska projects, compared with 5,000 for the Deepwater Horizon, and that the shallower wells would be under less pressure.

Mr. Slaiby said a 300-foot response ship outfitted with spill-fighting tools, including booms, skimmers and dispersants, would be stationed within a one-hour trip of the drill rig. Smaller boats would also be on constant call.

The Minerals Management Service has said that nearly 27 billion barrels of oil could be produced off the Alaska coast, potentially one of the largest remaining sources of oil in the nation. Mr. Slaiby said Shell would not rush to develop the site.

“We are patient capitalists,” he said. “This is a company that’s willing to take bets on energy. We like what we see out there.”