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Arctic Drilling Proposal Advanced Amid Concern



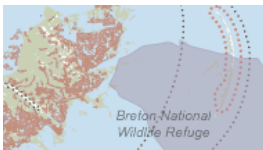
Damon Winter/The New York Times

BP's Endicott oil and gas facility at the edge of the Beaufort Sea. Shell Oil wants to drill dozens of miles offshore in federal waters.

By WILLIAM YARDLEY
Published: May 19, 2010

A proposal to drill for [oil](#) in the Arctic Ocean as early as this summer received initial permits from the [Minerals Management Service](#) office in Alaska at the same time federal auditors were questioning the office about its environmental review process.

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The approvals also came after many of the agency's most experienced scientists had left, frustrated that their concerns over environmental threats from drilling had been ignored.

Minerals Management has faced intense scrutiny in the weeks since the [oil spill](#) in the Gulf of Mexico. An article in The New York Times reported that it failed to get some environmental permits to approve drilling in the gulf and ignored objections from scientists to keep those projects on schedule.

Similar concerns are being raised about the agency's handling of a plan by Shell Oil to begin exploratory drilling in the Arctic's Beaufort and Chukchi Seas.

The Shell plan has stirred controversy for many years

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among environmentalists and advocates of the endangered bowhead whale, which is legally hunted in the area for subsistence by Alaska Natives.

Opponents have argued that an oil spill would be virtually impossible to contain, given the region's remoteness, its severe weather and ice and limited onshore support.

The [investigation of the Minerals Management's Alaska office](#) by the [Government Accountability Office](#), completed in March, examined the environmental review process for proposed offshore leasing in southwest Alaska, which has since been canceled.

But it also raised questions about future leasing plans in the Beaufort and Chukchi at the time the agency was deciding whether to allow Shell to go forward on leases it had purchased. The Shell project received critical initial permits from Minerals Management last fall, though it still needs several final approvals.

The G.A.O. found that the Alaska branch deliberately avoided establishing consistent guidelines for determining whether future leases would cause significant environmental impacts in the Arctic — a finding that could require further examination and delay or prevent drilling.

It noted that Minerals Management had yet to complete a handbook for reviewing environmental issues that the Department of Interior, which oversees the agency, had asked it to write.

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"When we talked to managers, the story was that, 'Well, we have the institutional knowledge — if you put things in the handbook, it gets outdated,'" said Mark Gaffigan, a director on the G.A.O.'s natural resources and environment team and the author of the report.

Yet when G.A.O. investigators interviewed many of the agency's environmental analysts in Alaska, Mr. Gaffigan said, "They felt there was a need. They wanted consistent ways for how the analysis was to be done."

The findings described in the G.A.O. report were echoed in interviews with current and former scientists and employees at the Alaska office of Minerals Management and bolstered by documents posted online by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

All of those interviewed, including some who have found other government jobs, spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of repercussions at work.

The lack of clear guidance in the environmental review process was exacerbated by high turnover among scientists at the agency, many of whom said in interviews that they left for other jobs because they had been pressured to rewrite their work or had it rewritten for them and that they were perceived as obstacles in the way of drilling. Managers, on the other hand, tended to stay.

"My impression was they had predetermined decisions and if you didn't get with the program you were sort of labeled and ostracized, really," said one former minerals agency scientist. "But if you went along with the program and didn't do anything to obstruct anything, they would treat you well, promote you, give cash awards."

A spokesman for the minerals agency said that "M.M.S. Alaska takes the G.A.O. report very seriously and in fact even before the final report came out, we began addressing issues it raised." He declined to discuss accusations by agency scientists that they faced pressure.

Even as the administration has begun a review of its offshore leasing program and temporarily halted new [offshore drilling](#) projects, Shell says it hopes to begin drilling this



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