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No to Arctic Drilling

By FRANCES G. BEINECKE

ABOUT 55,000 gallons of oil have escaped into the North Sea since last week from a leaky pipeline operated by Royal Dutch Shell, about 100 miles off Scotland.

Last year, Americans watched in mounting fury as the oil industry and the federal government struggled for five disastrous months to contain the much larger BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico.

Now imagine the increased danger and difficulty of trying to cope with a similar debacle off Alaska's northern coast, where waters are sealed by pack ice for eight months of each year, gales roil fog-shrouded seas with waves up to 20 feet high and the temperature, combined with the wind chill, feels like 10 degrees below zero by late September.

That's the nightmare the Obama administration is inviting with its preliminary approval of a plan by Shell to drill four exploratory wells beginning next summer in the harsh and remote frontier of the Beaufort Sea, off the North Slope of Alaska.

The green light to drill now awaits Shell's receiving the necessary permits from various federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement.

The administration should put on the brakes. This is a reckless gamble we cannot afford. We can't prevent an Arctic blowout any more than we can avert disaster in the Gulf of Mexico or the North Sea. We don't have the infrastructure, the knowledge or the experience to cope with one if it occurs. It's irresponsible to drill in these waters unless we have those capabilities.

When the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, appointed by President Obama in May 2010, reported our findings and recommendations earlier this year, we specifically cited the need to address these shortcomings before exposing Arctic waters to this kind of risk.

We need comprehensive research on the vibrant yet little understood Arctic ecosystems, which are home to rich fisheries of salmon, cod and char, and habitat for beluga whales, golden eagles and spotted seals.

We need containment and response plans tailored to the demands of marine operations under some of the most unforgiving conditions anywhere on earth.

And we must be realistic about the kind of backup available in a place 1,000 miles from the nearest United States Coast Guard station.

Shell's latest spill, in the North Sea, reminds us of the peril we court by ignoring these urgent needs.

When BP's Macondo well blew out last year, killing 11 workers aboard the Deepwater Horizon, Americans believed the damage would be quickly contained.

The Gulf of Mexico, after all, is the epicenter of the global offshore oil industry, home to hundreds of companies that specialize in drilling wells beneath the sea. There were plenty of ships in the region, from the shrimping fleet to the Coast Guard, available to help the efforts to cap the well and contain the spill.

And yet, in the five months it took to kill the runaway well, 170 million gallons of toxic crude oil poured into the gulf.

The systems that we were promised would avert catastrophe by preventing or containing a blowout all failed one by one.

And cleanup operations couldn't save the marine life and birds that died, the 650 miles of coastline that was oiled or the deep water habitat now carpeted in crude, despite the efforts of nearly 50,000 workers using nearly 7,000 ships and boats.

Now comes Shell, claiming in its drilling application that its blowout preventers will work. If not, Shell asserts, it can quickly seal the well. And, should oil escape, the company insists, it will have booms, skimmers and helicopters at the ready.

Upon those thin hopes the newly constituted Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement recently gave Shell preliminary approval to attempt this high-wire act in the Arctic.

We have yet to embrace the lessons of the BP blowout, the worst oil spill in our history. While the bureau, formerly known as the Minerals Management Service, has improved drilling rules in helpful ways, Congress has yet to pass legislation to protect our waters, workers and wildlife from the dangers of offshore drilling.

Those dangers are only greater in the harsh and remote Arctic waters. Before we go to the ends of the earth in pursuit of oil, we need deeper knowledge, better technology to prevent blowouts and to clean up after accidents, and greater expertise to protect Alaska's Arctic waters, one of our oceans' last frontiers, from grave and needless risk.

Frances G. Beinecke, the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, served on the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling.