



The Beaufort and Chukchi Seas: Protecting America's Arctic

On the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas on Alaska's Arctic coast, sea ice meets the northern edge of the continent and animals concentrate in great numbers. This bountiful zone—home to millions of migratory birds, polar bears, beluga whales, endangered bowhead whales, and thousands-year-old Inupiat (Eskimo) culture—has been called the “Arctic Ring of Life.” But aggressive government interest in leasing these areas to the oil and gas industries for exploration and development threatens the sustainability of this ecosystem and the livelihood of Alaska Native communities.

The Majesty of Alaska's Arctic Coast

The Beaufort and Chukchi Seas are part of the circumpolar Arctic Ocean, and they have a rare mix of mineral-rich, cold offshore waters and freshwater flows from melting snow. The Chukchi Sea provides important feeding grounds for Pacific walrus, birds, and fish, and the sea's unique open-water leads offer feeding ground for bowhead and beluga whales and winter habitat for migrating mammals and birds, including a critical habitat for threatened spectacled eiders. These ocean waters have also sustained local Inupiat culture for thousands of years.

Renewed Government Threats to the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas

Every five years, the Interior Department starts with a clean slate for its five-year Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas leasing program, ignoring public concerns, scientific information, and

traditional Inupiat knowledge about the threat to Alaska's resources. Now the Bush Administration has greatly expanded Arctic offshore leasing with three sales covering 40 million acres in the Chukchi Sea. The Interior Department also plans two sales in the Beaufort Sea—sales that would compromise more than 33 million acres of Arctic wilderness and pave the way for a network of new roads, pipelines, docks, and other infrastructure that threaten the vital arctic ecosystem on which species and local communities depend.

In the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, more than 90 offshore wells have already been drilled, more than 171,000 miles of seismic lines have been shot, and a number of near-shore offshore fields are in production. In 2006, the oil industry began aggressive seismic exploration in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Much of the drilling would take place in the bowhead whale fall feeding area off the coast of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.



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Oil Development Puts Whales, Polar Bears, and Other Coastal Life at Risk

Oil exploration and development pose serious risks to the Beaufort Sea.

- The intense noise of seismic exploration and drilling has already pushed marine mammals farther out to sea. According to the National Academy of Sciences and reports from Inupiat subsistence hunters, drilling has already changed the migratory patterns of **endangered bowhead whales** by as much as 30 miles.
- **Polar bears** are especially vulnerable to oil spills because they search for food in the open lands and broken ice where spilled oil would pool.
- **Ringed seals** would be displaced by the effects of full-scale, offshore exploration and development, and would also see increasing mortality and decreasing reproductive success.
- **Pacific walrus** and **gray whales** could be disturbed from important feeding areas in the Chukchi Sea.
- **Waterfowl flocks**, including threatened Steller's and spectacled eiders in marine waters, lagoons, sensitive coastal wetlands, and protected area shorelines, could be devastated by spills.
- **Pristine shorelines** like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Teshekpuk Lake would be harmed by spills, air pollution, noise disturbance, and pressure build facilities such as ports, refineries, staging areas, airports, and pipelines. And as onshore development spreads along Alaska's coast, there is an increased chance that offshore development will be linked up, posing even greater cumulative impacts to wildlife and people.

Oil Spills Risk Devastating Harm to Marine Wildlife

While the government claims that there has never been a crude oil spill in the Alaskan or Beaufort Seas, 77 offshore spills of toxic substances were reported in just two years during offshore drilling and exploratory and development activities, according to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation spill database for 1989 to 1990. Spills are an everyday occurrence in Arctic oil drilling: the oil industry reported 4,534 spills across Alaska's North Slope and Beaufort

Sea from 1996 to 2004, involving more than 1.9 million gallons of diesel fuel, oil, acid, biocide, ethylene glycol, drilling fluid, and other materials. Most crude oil and refined petroleum product spills on the tundra took place during break-up and freeze-up, the times of greatest biological sensitivity.

Current oil projects are equally as dangerous: The federal government projected an 11 to 24 percent chance of a major spill for the Northstar oil field, now in production on the Beaufort Sea, and a 95 percent cumulative spill risk when combined with all North Slope and offshore oil developments. Cleanup methods fail to remove more than a small fraction of oil spilled in marine waters, especially in the presence of broken ice. What's more, the oil industry failed the "spill drills" required for approval of the Northstar oil spill response plans, and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation found that BP was unable to meet safety basic precautions and was ill-prepared to even test equipment in icy Beaufort Sea waters.

The Widespread Consequences of Global Warming

The Beaufort and Chukchi Seas face another threat that is only compounded by oil development: global warming. Climate change is already having dramatic impacts on the sea ice and marine and coastal habitats of wildlife and local Inupiat communities. The ice cover of the Arctic has been shrinking at a rate of 3 percent per decade, while the steep permafrost bluffs behind the narrow beaches of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas are receding an average of 2.5 m (8 feet) per year.

The planned oil and gas leasing and development will not only do irrevocable damage to the precious wildlife of the Arctic Ocean, but will also produce new sources of global warming emissions that will only add to the already startling environmental changes taking place in the region. We must keep oil and gas drilling out of sensitive habitats in the "Arctic Ring of Life" and instead develop clean, renewable energy sources that can help sustain local communities and reduce global warming pollution.



For decades, Arctic offshore leasing has been opposed by the North Slope Borough, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, and Alaska Native villages because of the potential for devastating spills that can't be cleaned up, damage to ecosystems, and extreme risks to the basis of their culture.

