

Arctic Ocean Offshore Development 101

America's Arctic Ocean, the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, is home to polar bears, bowhead whales, walrus and many other iconic animals. Oil and gas development currently threatens these waters, despite a serious lack of scientific understanding of the region and having no credible means for cleaning up an oil spill in the Arctic's harsh and remote conditions.

A Turning Point in the Arctic Ocean

Over the past decade, Shell Oil Company and others invested heavily in an Arctic oil and gas program. However, following its disastrous exploration season in 2012 and a second failed attempt in 2015, Shell elected to pull out of Alaska 'for the foreseeable future.' Other major companies have also opted out of their Arctic offshore programs. There are currently 40 active leases in the Beaufort Sea owned by various oil companies.

In 2015 and 2016, the Obama administration withdrew 125 million acres of the Arctic Ocean from oil and gas development. These decisions protect subsistence resources and access, and protect important special areas in both seas. One of these areas is Hanna Shoal, which plays an essential role in climate regulation in the Arctic Ocean. The shoals are shallow enough to divert warmer waters, yet also maintain persistent ice floes while the rest of the Arctic sea ice melts around them in the summer. They are a stronghold for ice-dependent wildlife like the Pacific walrus, polar bear, gray whale, bearded seal and ringed seal.

On April 28, 2017, Donald Trump issued an Executive Order (EO) illegally revoking the Obama withdrawals, and the Trump administration is currently in the process of creating a new leasing program for 2019-2024. The Trump EO is currently being challenged in federal court; however, the new draft leasing program does include areas withdrawn by the Obama administration. The proposed program includes six leases in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. Even before the new leasing program is completed, the administration has already begun the process to conduct a lease sale in the Beaufort Sea in 2019.

Climate Change Impacts

America's Arctic is ground zero for the devastating impacts of climate change – warming at about twice the rate of the rest of the world – and offshore drilling will only exacerbate the problem. Scheduling leases in the Arctic Ocean is incompatible with combating climate change because it would encourage development of new fossil fuel reserves that science tells us we cannot burn if we wish to limit warming to 2 °C or less.

The Bottom Line:

No lease sales should take place in the Arctic Ocean. Time after time, people across the country have voiced their opinion that drilling is too risky and too dirty to allow in the Arctic Ocean. We must defend Arctic Ocean protections for future generations. Congress must oppose moving forward with the 2019 Beaufort Sea lease sale and the inclusion of new Arctic Ocean lease sales in any offshore drilling plan.

