

Health & Science

Shell Oil gets preliminary approval to drill in the Arctic Ocean

Environment | Science

by **John J. Berger** - May 29, 2015

Controversial move threatens Chukchi Sea



"Refugio Oil Spill in Santa Barbara" by Zackmann08 for Wiki - Midnight Sun on the Chukchi Sea by Milo Burcham for <http://ak.audubon.org/chukchi-sea>

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SAN DIEGO, May 29, 2015 – Where are we heading now in our quest for more “cheap energy”? North, to the Arctic! Despite the Obama administration’s jawboning about the dangers of climate change and its Climate Action Plan, it has just given a conditional approval to Shell Oil to drill for oil in the perilous waters of the Chukchi Sea.

Experts who know the risks of drilling in those cold and remote waters say the conditions make the probability of an oil spill high. They also say Shell has no credible means of cleaning it up. The company’s record scarcely inspires confidence.

Shell’s oil spill containment device for capping well blowouts failed dramatically in a regulatory test. By one account, it was “crushed like a beer can.” One of the company’s drilling rigs broke loose in 2012 from its anchor in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, in the Aleutian Islands.

The ghosts of past spills loom over oil blanketing Santa Barbara’s beaches

Another Shell rig, the Kulluk, famously ran aground in 2012 and was nearly lost. After these setbacks, the company suspended operations in 2013 and 2014.

Not surprisingly, Shell's drilling plans in the Arctic have provoked fervent opposition. A flotilla of some 500 Native Americans, environmentalists and other concerned citizens from Seattle and the northwest, converged on the Port of Seattle, where Shell had brought its outsized Polar Pioneer offshore oil platform in mid-May.

The "Paddle in Seattle" "kayaktivists" in colorful kayaks and other small boats swarmed around the massive Shell drilling rig in Seattle's Elliot Bay. Some protesters chanted "Shell, No." The flotilla was supported by about 1,500 protesters on land, who blocked a port terminal leading to the rig for several hours.

The mayor of Seattle and others on the city council have opposed letting Shell use the port to stage its drilling operations. But Shell smells big money in the Arctic and is determined to get on with the drilling if it possibly can, **despite court challenges**. The company still needs a variety of additional permits before it can proceed.

The story of the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon explosion is a cautionary tale about the dangers of offshore drilling. It was the nation's worst oil disaster, and filmmaker Margaret Brown explores its aftermath in her new documentary, "The Great Invisible," screened May 12 at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco by the Boston-based nonprofit Ceres.

"The Great Invisible" tells the sad tale of the Deepwater Horizon disaster and its lethal legacy. The company has since mounted a public relations campaign to show how well it has done by the Gulf since the accident, and how clean the Gulf now is.

BP has spent more than \$28 billion since the accident on response, cleanup, "early restoration," and the settlement of claims across Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi plus federal government claims. Another \$1.3 billion has been spent on a Natural Resource Damage Assessment and \$74 million on a state-led seafood testing and marketing program.

BP's website extols the Gulf's "resiliency" and draws comparisons to the Gulf's assimilation of natural oil seeps. It creates the impression that the effects of the disaster are in the rear view mirror.

Contrary to media hysteria, Gulf thriving 5 years after BP oil spill

The trouble is, the Gulf isn't clean, and its recovery is incomplete. Sea turtles and dolphins are still dying, for example, the latter in record numbers. Twelve hundred dolphins have washed up dead in the Gulf since 2010.

And as Antonia Juhasz has documented in a noteworthy in-depth article in Harper's, "Thirty Million Gallons Under the Sea," millions of gallons of spilled BP oil are still in the Gulf and are not going away soon, contrary to company's blandishments.

Juhasz told "Democracy Now!" host Amy Goodman in a recent interview that when Juhasz visited the spill site with oil spill expert Dr. Samantha Joye and made a rare submarine dive near the spill site, Juhasz encountered a large dead zone.

"There is a blanket of oil, as much as two inches thick, covering 3,000 square feet of the ocean floor, she said. According to Joye, the BP cleanup effort "left about 30 million barrels of oil behind," an amount comparable to the Exxon Valdez oil spill or more.

The oil was mixed with Corexit, the dispersant BP used in the cleanup efforts. In combination with oil, the resulting witches' brew is 50 times as toxic as either substance alone, Juhasz said. According to Joye, microbes won't eat this mixture due to its toxicity, so the poisonous oily gunk will remain on the cold, dark, dead seafloor indefinitely.

In the course of her dive, Juhasz also discovered new exploratory oil activity on the erstwhile BP lease area. She was later able to document that the Obama administration has quietly allowed most of the BP oil lease to be sold to another oil company, which has started to drill in the area.

The Great Invisible: The BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster and its invisible legacy

"The Great Invisible" amply documents the ongoing nightmare that survivors of the original Deepwater Horizon disaster have endured. It captures the suffering and impoverishment left in spill's wake as well as BP's claim that everyone would be made whole financially after the disaster.

That notion is put to rest when we hear from destitute claimants who were unable to jump through BP's bureaucratic hoops. The film also effectively drives home our dependency on oil, especially for transportation, but it has serious shortcomings.

Whereas these are important scenes to get on the record, ultimately, "The Great Invisible" provides viewers next to no answers to the oil dependency it decries. It fails to rebut deprecating remarks made by smug oil industry executives about renewable energy and stops short of offering positive alternatives to disheartened viewers.

The Arctic Alaska Petroleum Province, where Shell wants to drill this summer is said to hold 28 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 128 trillion feet of natural gas. Depending on oil prices, the 28 billion barrels of oil alone could represent \$280 billion in oil company profits, not to mention the gas windfall.

Shell sees the Arctic as its "biggest source of crude oil globally within the next 20 years," according to [Colin Chilcoat](#) (Oil Price Daily, May 22, 2015). Despite the long-lasting environmental carnage that Arctic drilling could inflict on Arctic ecosystems and fisheries and native peoples (and the climatic impacts), Shell is not alone in lusting after the Arctic's hydrocarbon wealth.

China, India and Vietnam are positioning themselves to exploit Arctic resources, and Russia is already drilling. Now that the U.S. is the head of the Arctic Council, its preliminary nod toward Shell is a worrisome sign that past is prologue. Those who are willfully blind to the costly oil blunders of the recent past seem prepared to repeat them on a new and nearly pristine stage for their short-term profit but at the planet's expense.

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