

Groups: Drilling offshore may harm walruses

Native, Bush and environmental groups have joined forces to request a halt to offshore drilling activities that they say jeopardize walruses in the Chukchi Sea.

The Eskimo Walrus Commission, the Rural Alaska Resources Association and Trustees for Alaska, a public interest environmental law firm, requested that the U.S. Interior Department revoke approval of Shell Western E&P Inc.'s drilling plan and halt all proposed exploratory activities commencing this month in the Chukchi Sea.

The groups petitioned Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan Jr. after information released by Shell Western revealed that last summer's exploratory activities in the Chukchi Sea resulted in the taking of Pacific walruses in violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

"Our well-being as coastal Natives depends on the well-being of the walrus," said Ben Nageak, the chairman of the Eskimo Walrus Commission.

The groups are highly concerned over the adverse effects Shell Western's activities may have on the availability of walruses to subsistence users in Native communities on the western and northern coasts of Alaska.

"We are concerned that blame for any increased walrus taking falls where the blame is due," said Nageak in response to recent reports of misuse by Alaska Natives of the Alaska Native exemption to the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Approximately 80 percent of the world's population of Pacific walrus summer in the Chukchi Sea during the period when Shell Western's exploratory operations are scheduled to occur.