

'Limit drilling until more known'

By Pete Spivey
For the Tundra Times

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) should continue to limit exploratory oil drilling in the Beaufort Sea to a 5-month winter season until more complete studies of marine wildlife are done, said Dr. Tom Albert, science advisor to the North Slope Borough.

At a hearing last week before DNR Commissioner John Katz, who plans to decide by March 8 whether to renew, modify or suspend the winter restrictions, Albert said there still is too little known about the effects of drilling rig noise and oil spills on sea animals to allow the industry to work year-round in the Beaufort.

"In my view we are just beginning to get at the problem," Albert said. "Some of the whale studies have been over-interpretive and the oil spill cleanup and spill trajectory studies done have been very modest. Clearly, there needs to be much more work

done before anyone can say year-round drilling won't harm anything."

Both the state and federal governments included 2-year stipulations on Beaufort Sea offshore leases sold in December 1979. The stipulations, which also have been since applied to offshore leases sold before 1979, restrict exploratory drilling to period between Nov. 1 and March 31 when the ice usually is at its thickest.

The experimental restriction, which expires March 31 on state leases, was aimed both at avoiding noisy drilling operations that might disturb wildlife during mating and migratory seasons in the Beaufort, and at reducing the chance of an oil spill during times of broken ice, when it might be impossible to clean up.

Part of the reasoning for the drilling restriction was the lack of scientific data about wildlife in the Beaufort, especially the bowhead whale. Fears

that year-round drilling might disrupt the bowhead's migratory pattern — threatening the whaling season, a mainstay of North Slope Eskimo culture — hardly could be countered with such a dearth of information about the animals' habits.

Studies done since the stipulations were written have produced some indications of bowhead habits. But the information is far from conclusive, according to Albert, and no one knows whether drilling noise alone might cause whales to move far away from the coast in their spring and fall migrations.

"Is one well going to do this? I don't think so, but the question is, how many will it take before that does happen? That is what we don't know," Albert said.

Another North Slope spokesman, Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corp. science advisor Dr. Robert Harcharek, urged Katz to retain the drilling restrictions until a lawsuit in San Francisco

U.S. District Court determines whether the state has disenfranchised traditional Inupiat use of sea ice by selling offshore oil leases.

And Harcharek said the potential for long term damage to wildlife is too critical to Inupiat culture to be taken lightly.

"We, as Inupiat, cannot stand by and watch this destruction of our culture," he said. "Our concerns about the quality of life in the Arctic are real, and they are not going to be ignored."

The oil industry has its own concerns about the drilling restriction, however. Its spokesmen say the probability of a significant spill is near zero; that any spilled oil, in broken or solid ice, could be burned off or cleaned up with specialized new equipment; and that less-regulated industrial activity in the Canadian Beaufort has not disturbed whales there.

The industry has portrayed the restriction as an unnecessary burden on exploration that costs them millions of dollars in shut down expenses, rental fees for drilling rigs and income lost because of delays in field development. The industry also says its losses must be passed on to the state in the form of reduced petroleum income, a loss that one study estimates as high as \$505 million per field.

As the decision on renewing the stipulations draws nearer, the industry's complaints about the economic impact have begun to sharpen into threats. Roger Herrera, exploration officer for Sohio Alaska Petroleum Co., told Katz during last week's hearing that his ruling would determine whether the company develops a potentially commercial Beaufort field it is analyzing now.

"If we cannot work that field year-round, there is one guarantee that can be made to you: That oil field will never be developed," Herrera said.

In an interview after last week's hearings, Katz said Inupiat concerns will be fully considered before he makes his ruling. But because the oil industry's position also is valid, he said, there is little hope of making a decision that does not anger someone.

"There is very little wiggle room on this one, and I view it as the most difficult decision in my professional life," Katz said. "No matter which way I go on this, some people are going to feel their interests have been unfairly impacted."

Katz said the polarity of viewpoints has forced him to immerse himself in all the information available to him, and he will familiarize himself with the data to a point usually achieved only by a lower-level staff person.

He also said he probably won't escape criticism even with a ruling that modified the restriction, such as a Department of Environmental Conservation proposal to slightly expand the winter season and to set threshold depths for drilling the rest of the year.

And regardless of what he decides, Katz figures his ruling will be challenged in court, and that is why he wants to make his decision before the stipulation expires March 31.

"I have an obligation, both to the industry and to the North Slope folks, to make this decision so they can plan how to deal with it," he said. "It's the kind of situation where you can expect to end up in court, regardless of what you do."