

Report: subsistence may be affected by drilling

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Hearings will be held in several North Slope villages next week to obtain public comment on an offshore drilling plan which, according to an environmental impact statement, could have far-reaching and long-lasting effects on the lifestyle and subsistence resources of the area.

Hearings are set in Barrow, Nuiqsut, Kaktovik, Fairbanks, and Anchorage on the proposal to open offshore oil drilling in the Beaufort Sea Diapir Field. That field consists of

approximately 1.8 million acres of offshore area ranging from 3 to 37 miles offshore in water depths from 16 feet to 131 feet.

According to the Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the field has a 99 percent probability of having oil found in it. Those resources are estimated to have about 2.38 billion barrels of oil and 1.78 trillion cubic feet of gas in the area.

The proposal has several alternatives to it and those will be the subject of discussion at the public hearings to take

place.

The first alternative calls for the entire proposed leasing area to be drilled; the second alternate calls for no sale whatsoever; the third alternative would delay the sale by at least two years; the fourth would delete 33 leasing blocks in the north/northwest portions of the sale area because of ice hazard conditions;

Alternative 5 calls for deleting 49 blocks in the Cape Halkett area which is an important area for Barrow subsistence activities for bowhead whales and seals.

Alternative 6 would de-

lete 47 blocks in the southern portion of the Beaufort sea. This alternative would protect subsistence and biological resources in the Colville River Delta which is a highly productive wildlife habitat for nesting birds, migratory waterfowl, seals, caribou and anadromous fisheries. Nuiqsut subsistence harvest of all these species occurs in this delta.

Alternative 7 would eliminate 37 blocks in the Southern Beaufort Sea between the Colville River and Prudhoe Bay. This area has a high seal and caribou population.

According to the report, if

the total proposed leasing area is leased out as in Alternate 1, six to nine spills exceeding 1 1,000 barrels of oil spilled, are probable over the 30-year life of the oil field.

According to the report, eliminating the Cape Halkett area would "significantly reduce social impacts expected to result from the proposal..." because it would significantly reduce potential oil spills from the western portion of the proposed lease sale area and would reduce disturbance and interference with traditional subsistence activities at Smith Bay.

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Spills, increased North Slope population, could diminish subsistence resources

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Pitt Point, and Cape Simpson.

Eliminating the Colville Delta tract would "significantly reduce potential impacts to the overwintering boreal smelt (Ithuinuq). The report also states that eliminating this tract would reduce noise and disturbances near the Colville Delta and could reduce potential impacts to the spotted seal haul-out areas.

This alternative would not significantly reduce impacts to terrestrial mammals or endangered whale habitats.

The Simpson Lagoon Deletion would reduce the probabilities of an oil spill in the Simpson Lagoon area and would reduce disturbances to the western extension of the whaling and sealing range of Kaktovik to the eastern extension of the sealing and whaling range of Nuiqsut.

According to the report, residents of the North Slope would see very few jobs as a result of the drilling. The report stated that most jobs would go to workers who commute to and from the Anchorage, Fairbanks area. Peak employment impacts would occur in 1955 and total 4,100 jobs for Anchorage, 900 for Fairbanks, and 500 for the South-central region.

These new North Slope residents could create a strain on harvesting subsistence resources in the area is if the new workers hunt or fish, according to the report. The opening of the North Slope Haul Road which already has been done, "could intensify competition for key subsistence resources," according to the report.

According to the report, the Smith Bay to Cape Halkett area "is the area of greatest risk," because the area is an important bowhead feeding area and encompasses the hunt-

ing and fishing range for the villages of Barrow and Nuiqsut.

The report states that if an oil spill occurred during the open-water period when bowheads and their young are in the area, it could potentially affect individual whales, disturb their behavior or encourage them to avoid or temporarily abandon the area.

An oil spill and clean-up efforts could disturb subsistence sealing and fishing activities during the duration of the spill and clean-up.

Ringed seals which "occur in fairly large concentrations" in the area could be affected greatly by a spill in that area.

The report also takes into account the spiritual relationship between Eskimo whalers and their whaling and says an oil spill in the lease area or anywhere along the bowhead's range . . . would probably induce some psychological stress on Inupiat whaling cultures

and peoples.

"Spiritual beliefs which tie the Inupiat people to the bowhead whale imply a lack of outside disturbance and a sense of unity between the whale and hunters which is extremely difficult to preserve under conditions which exist during or shortly after an oil spill event."

The report warns that an oil spill on or under the ice "could seriously affect take of fish, seals, or polar bear if these resources were oiled, or if persistence of oil in the area reduced the recovery rate of biological populations."

The report, quoting a study conducted by anthropologist Rosita Worl in 1979 and 1980, states that while Inupiat cul-

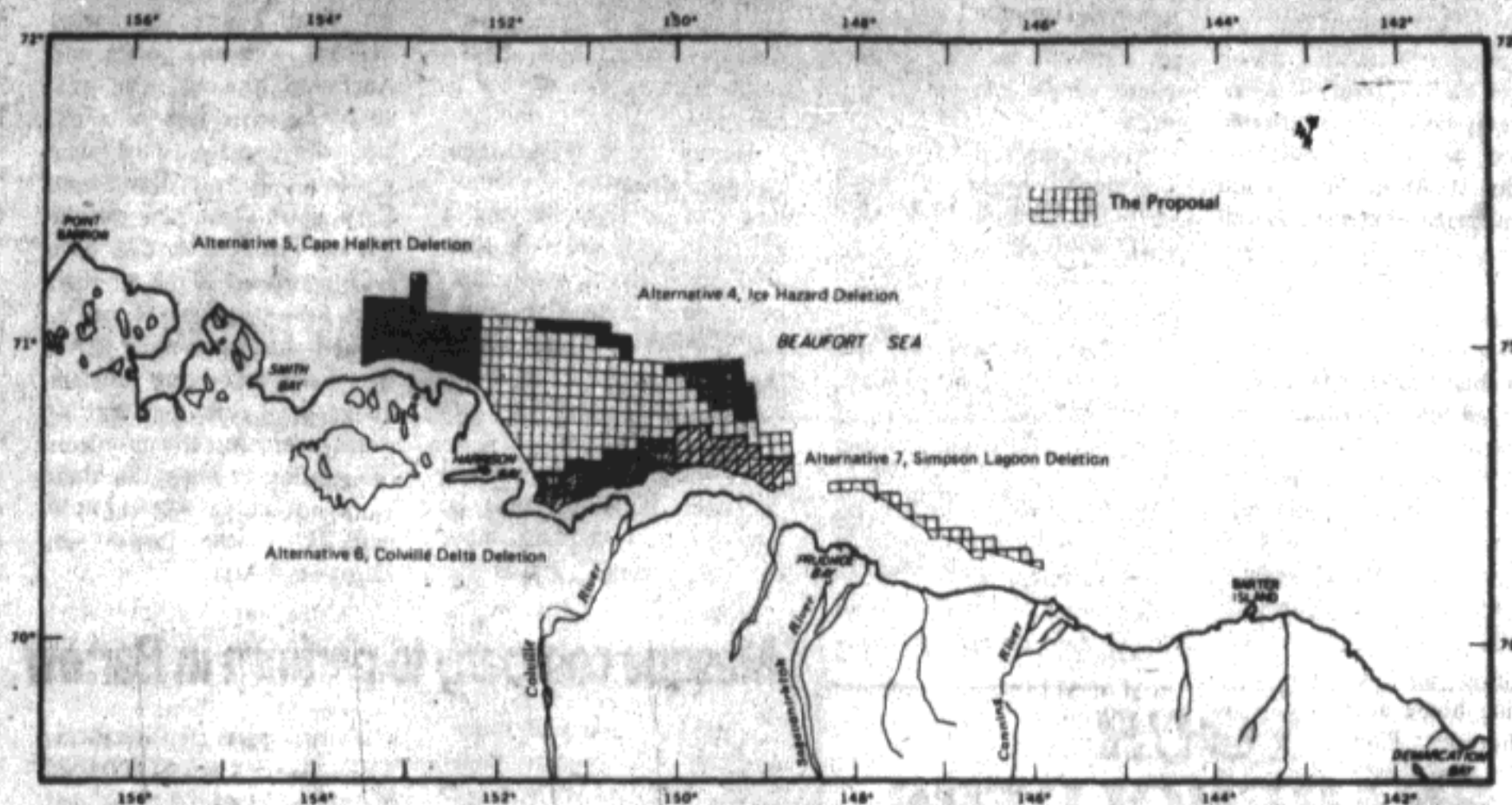
tural patterns of sharing have been maintained, "considerable individual and social stress has been reported because of the severe reduction in take of bowhead whales and caribou. The continuing depletion of subsistence resources on the North Slope and habitat on the North Slope can be expected to add to the 'already high' levels of personal and family stress and tension resulting from these earlier restrictions on subsistence take."

The report also cautions that the decrease in take resulting in change of diet for residents "can be expected to interact with other sources of stress, perhaps encouraging illness and premature mortality."

Development activity for the proposed entire lease area calls for about 32 exploration wells built on gravel islands. About 164 miles of pipeline would be used to carry the oil to shore. If oil is found, 462 production wells are proposed.

The negative effects of gravel island placement is mentioned and the report states that the development activity could tend to scare off or reduce subsistence resources in the area.

An offshoot of that reduction is the probability that hunters will have to spend more cash to obtain the same amount of fish or game take because the hunters may have to range farther.



Source: Alaska OCS Office (1982)

THE PROPOSAL

Approximate Scale: 1:4,300,000