

North Slope villages sue to halt oil drilling in Beaufort Sea

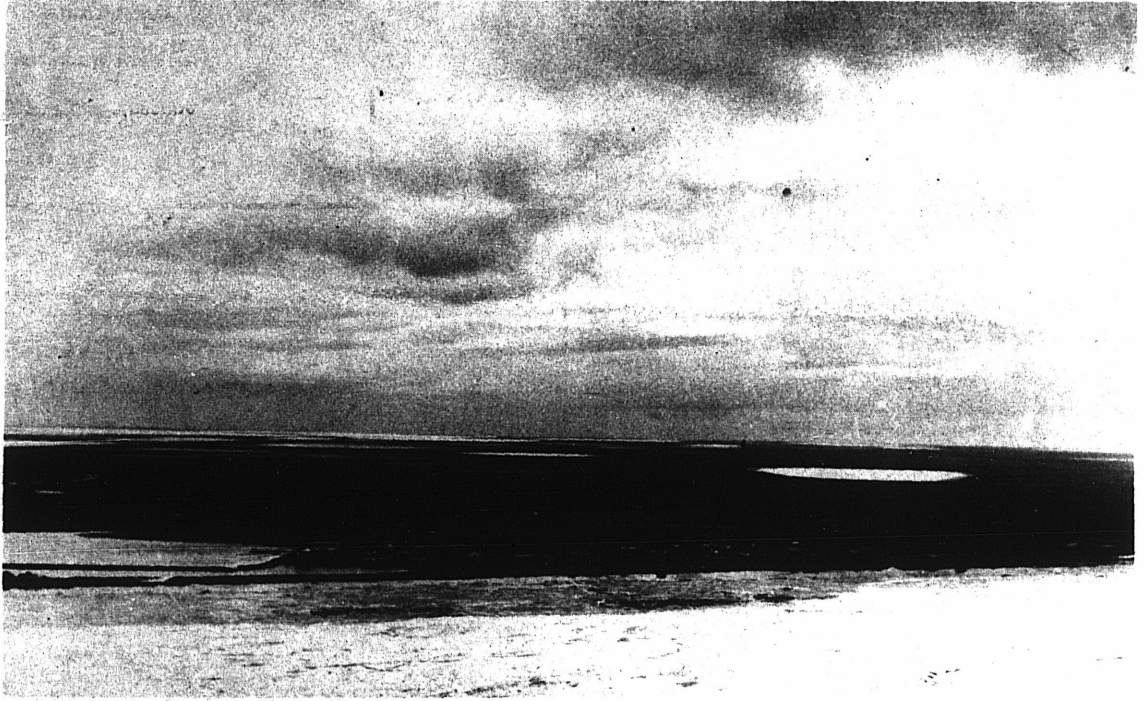
Three Native villages and two individuals brought suit Friday to stop Exxon from drilling for oil near Duck Island in the Beaufort Sea.

Alleging that the drilling could seriously affect their subsistence way of life, the plaintiffs asked for injunctions in both state and federal court against Exxon, Robert LeResche, State Commissioner of Natural Resources, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Bringing the suit are Herman Resford, Ralph Ahkivgak, and the villages of Kaktovik, Nuiqsut and Barrow.

"I am worried about these drilling plans, because oil spills and noise and other pollution from the operations will disturb the wildlife that lives and migrates through the nearshore area where the wells are planned or built," Rexford said in an affidavit filed with the suit. "In my visits to the Prudhoe Bay oil operation, I have seen how the drilling operations cause a lot of helicopter traffic and the vehicle noise at the drilling site I have also smelled the drilling mud and waste pits near the rigs, and I know that such smells would disturb the wildlife."

Of particular concern to the plaintiffs are the hazards the drilling operations pose to the bowhead whale. "Even small amounts of pollution from these drilling sites would make the bowhead change its migration route," Ahkivgak said. "If this kind of pollution happens, the whales may not show up again where the Inupiat can hunt them."

The lawsuits charge that state and federal permits issued to Exxon in connection with the Duck Island drilling operations are invalid. Plaintiffs allege that they did not receive notice of the permit applications and that the permits themselves should not have been granted until an Environmental Impact



THE CITY OF BARROW was one of three North Slope villages named in a suit filed last week to halt oil drilling in the Beaufort Sea. The villages of Kaktovik, Nuiqsut also joined in the suit which alleges that drilling could seriously affect their subsistence way of life.

● Villages file suit

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Statement was prepared and environmental and wildlife values considered.

"I have been informed how the Corps issued a permit this spring to the Exxon Corporation to build its Duck Island Unit Well No. 1 gravel pad without even notifying our village of what was planned, even though our people could be badly hurt by Exxon's operations" said Thomas Napageak, former mayor of Nuiqsut. "Since we did not know about the permit, there was no way for us to protest it, to talk to attorneys about it, or to contact state agencies which are also involved in such drilling proposals."

According to the plaintiffs, there is a real danger that a serious accident could occur at the offshore oil rig. The most dangerous time would be spring breakup when the ice has loosened, and currents can cause giant pressure ridges up to 30 ft. high," according to Rexford. "I observed such pressure ridges in

the Beaufort Sea during my hunting trips in the Prudhoe Bay area before the oil companies came. I have seen how these ridges can push huge blocks of ice, and in my opinion these pressure ridges could sweep over the gravel island and push the equipment and drilling wastes into the water."

The effects of an oil spill, according to the villagers, are likely to be devastating. Thomas Brower, a whaling captain and owner of the Cape Smythe Whaling and Trading Company in Barrow, recalls what happened in 1944 when a Navy cargo ship spilled 25 000 gallons of oil in the Beaufort Sea:

"In the cold Arctic water, the oil formed a mass several inches thick on top of the water. Both sides of the barrier

islands in that area — the Plover Islands — became covered with oil," Brower said. "I observed how seals and birds who swam in the water would be blinded and suffocated by contact with the oil. It took approximately four years for the oil to finally disappear."

The villages of Nuiqsut and Kaktovik asked the federal government to reconsider the Exxon permit when they learned of it in September. Their request, however, was not heeded, forcing the villages to bring lawsuits now.

Exxon has acknowledged that drilling operations have already begun at the Duck Island site. Robert Riddle, district landsman for Exxon, said he was "surprised" to learn that the lawsuits had been filed.