

NSB may sue on drilling window

By Bill Hess

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The North Slope Borough may initiate a federal lawsuit to prevent an extension of the drilling season for exploratory oil wells in off-shore areas of the Beaufort Sea.

Eugene Brower, borough mayor, made the announcement shortly after the state announced preliminary approval to lift restrictions placed in 1974 and to extending the exploratory drilling season.

"The oil industry has done very little to prepare for Arctic offshore oil-spill emergencies," Brower said in a prepared statement. "Tests last summer demonstrated the industry's inability to remove oil from broken ice conditions, which prevail during the bowhead's annual migration.

"The seasonal drilling res-

trictions removed by the state were put into place by the Hammond administration to conform with requirements of the endangered Species Act protecting the bowhead whale," Brower said, noting the borough was consulting its attorneys about a federal suit under the terms of the Act.

"We may have to sue, but I have not made that decision yet," Brower said.

Bob Buttz, natural resources officer of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources said that while the state recognized the possibility for a serious accident existed, the probability was unlikely.

"Should there be a requirement that safety be 100 percent effective before there can be any drilling?" Buttz asked. "It's like getting on an airplane.

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Drilling window

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If I require a 100 percent assurance that we don't crash, it couldn't be done. I couldn't get on the airplane."

Buttz said the preliminary approval required the oil companies involved to meet some ten stipulations, which he said were designed to protect the bowhead whale and the environment. During the migration season, no drilling would be allowed outside the barrier islands in the main path followed by the whales.

Drilling would be allowed inside if the companies were willing to fund a state approved whale monitoring program, Buttz said, which would include participation from the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Despite state assurance that there is no great risk, whaling captain Percy Nusunginya is unconvinced. He cites documents which he said guarantees at least nine oil spills offshore.

Nusunginya expressed fears for the oil which could go under the surface of the water and the ice, and clog up the baleen through which the bowhead strains its food.