

Federal offshore oil lease sales being scheduled

Many rural Alaskans heaved a sigh of relief when Congress voted this summer to continue the ban on offshore drilling in Bristol Bay. Adding to the good news was the announcement that leases sold in the area several years ago will be purchased back by the federal government. However, other offshore sales are being scheduled over the objections of coastal residents in several areas.

One of the most controversial is the plan to lease acreage in the stormy and seasonally ice-choked Chukchi Sea off northwest Alaska. Only seven months after canceling a proposed U.S.-Russian lease sale in the area, the Minerals Management Service has resurrected the Chukchi offering as a unilateral project.

The Chukchi sale is listed in the recently-released *Draft 5-Year Program for Natural Gas and Oil Activities on the Outer Continental Shelf*. A statement released by the Minerals Management Service states:

"Lease sales proposed for the Alaska OCS Region include offerings in only five of the 15 planning areas—Beaufort Sea, Cook Inlet/Shelikof Strait, Gulf of

Alaska, Chukchi Sea, and Hope Basin. If they are indeed hydrocarbon prone, prospects in the Beaufort Sea and Chukchi planning areas could hold vast quantities of oil. There is production from State lands and waters adjacent to the Beaufort Sea Planning Area, and the State of Alaska has plans for more leasing in State waters. There is industry interest in the Gulf of Alaska and in Cook Inlet, and lease sales are planned for State waters in both areas. Hope Basin is not prospective by itself, but there may be interest in portions of the planning area in a combined sale with the Chukchi Planning Area."

According to the statement, a task force which included state, Native, fishing, subsistence, environmental as well as industrial representatives participated in discussions that led to the Alaskan recommendations. The statement implies the sales are endorsed by task force members.

Copies of the federal OCS program are available from Minerals Management Service/Public Af-

fairs, 949 East 36th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99508-4302, or by calling 1-800-764-2627.

Comments on the program are due by October 9 and must be sent to: 5-Year Program Director, Minerals Management Service (MS4430), Room 1324, 381 Elden Street, Herndon, VA 22070. Envelopes or packages should be marked "Comments on the Draft Proposed 5-Year OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 1997-2002."

While the new 5-year program is being assembled, Minerals Management Service is moving forward with Lease Sale 144 in the Beaufort Sea Planning Area. This sale has drawn sharp protest from Inupiat on the Arctic Slope who fear the impacts of drilling and potential oil spills on bowhead whales and other vital marine species utilized for subsistence.

According to an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the sale, government planners assume spills will occur somewhere in the 9.8 million acre sale area.

"Each of the two assumed oil spills is expected to have lethal and sublethal effects on up to 2 percent of the lower trophic-level organisms, which include the phytoplankton, zooplankton,

benthic, and epontic communities for a period of (less than) 7 years," the analysis says.

It predicts that fish and birds could recover from such impacts in a fairly short time. One to three years was predicted for recovery of bowhead whales.

The Sale 144 report predicted equally minimal impacts on North

Slope communities.

"Overall . . . disruption of socio-cultural systems is expected for a period of (less than) one year without a tendency to displace existing institutions," the analysis states.

Comments on Sale 144 and the EIS are due by November 20. Hearings will be held in October and November.