

State, groups sue to stop lease sale

The Associated Press

* The North Slope Borough, the State of Alaska and California and six other environmental groups have gone to federal court in an effort to halt Interior Secretary James Watt's five-year coastal oil

and gas leasing program.

The suit, filed Thursday in the U.S. Court of Appeals, charges that Watt's program fails to properly balance the potential for finding oil and gas with the possible environmental dangers.

"Never before has such a massive turnover of federal lands to private interests been proposed. No area of the outer continental shelf is excluded from the leasing schedule for environmental reasons," said

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Groups sue to stop offshore oil lease sale

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Sarah Chasis, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the groups bringing suit.

The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Joining Alaska, California and the North Slope Borough were Cenaliulrit, a coastal resources board representing people in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Delta area; the Natural Resources Defense Council; Friends of the Earth; the Sierra Club; Trustees for Alaska; the National Wildlife Federation; the National Audubon Society and the Conservation Law Foundation of New England.

The environmental groups said they were worried about the potential for catastrophic oil spills. They said this danger was even greater in the waters off Alaska, where ice and heavy seas would make clean-up harder.

The groups claimed that Watt's leasing program would offer for lease areas containing "some of the world's greatest fisheries, seabird colonies and marine mammal habitat."

Watt, in adopting the leasing program Wednesday, said it would be carried out under "rigorous environmental controls." The program calls for

making 1 billion acres, an area equal to half the land mass of the United States, available for leasing in 41 sales beginning next month.

Specifically, the state is asking for delays on what it calls the "premature" timing of five sales scheduled for frontier areas: Norton Basin (November 1982); St. George Basin near Bristol Bay (February 1983); Barrow Arch (February 1985 and February 1987) and the North Aleutian Basin (April 1985).

The state of Alaska went to court in 1980 to fight the Department of Interior's then 1980-1985 offshore lease schedule proposed by the Carter administration. The state amended its suit in 1981 after Watt proposed the current accelerated schedule that added five new sales off Alaska.

The state won the case in October, when the court ordered Watt to revise the schedule and follow statutory procedures for balancing environmental concerns with the potential for oil and gas discoveries.

Shortly before the state won the case, Watt agreed to honor Hammond's requests to delete a lease sale scheduled for the North Aleutian Basin which allows entry into seven so-called frontier areas, previously closed to oil drilling.