

Court refuses state's Bristol Bay oil appeal

Although the U.S. Supreme Court will not hear an appeal to halt offshore oil and gas exploration in the North Aleutian Basin, no drilling will take place until there is an effective oil spill response plan, according to the Interior Department.

The department will postpone any exploration until a spill plan has been proposed, approved and demonstrated, Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan said.

"We will not approve an exploration or development plan that is inadequate," Lujan said.

The review process would include other federal agencies, the state of Alaska, local governments and fisheries organizations, he said.

But Lujan also said no exploration or associated oil spill contingency plans have been submitted to date.

Last May, Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, wrote to Lujan requesting that Interior base future development of Lease 92 in the North Aleutian Basin on a study of the oil spill in Prince William Sound.

"We must be absolutely certain that the catastrophe we faced in Prince William Sound will never be replicated in Bristol Bay," Murkowski said.

Murkowski's request came after the supreme court decided not to hear a state of Alaska appeal to stop Lease 92 exploration and development.

There are no studies of oil spill response capabilities in the Bering Sea to date, Murkowski said.

"However, there is a great deal of information which could be used to formulate such an analysis including information obtained from the *Exxon Valdez* accident," he said.

A bill in Congress would require the department to review oil spill response plans for Bristol Bay, oil spill technology and equipment and the consequences of the spill in Prince William Sound.