

Beaufort decision favors Eskimos

A state judge has agreed with the North Slope Borough and the village of Kaktovik that oil drilling in the Beaufort Sea should be confined to the area on or inside the barrier islands that lay in a line off the northernmost coast of Alaska. Superior Court Judge Jay Hodges reasoned that not enough was known of the effects of such exploration on the bowhead whale and other subsistence resources of the Arctic Ocean. The ruling, of course, applies only to state tracts outside the barrier islands, not federal ones, since the court does not have jurisdiction there.

In his decision, Hodges enjoined the oil company-defendants and the State of Alaska from permitting any entry on those tracts outside the barrier islands for exploration, development, production or related activity, except for reasonably necessary access, scientific studies and directional drilling from the islands.

This latter exception means that directional drilling from barrier islands, such as Challenge Island, may be conducted to reach the tracts. Challenge Island is being readied by three tract owner-consortiums for drilling directionally to reach a point where their three leased tracts adjoin. The well is due to "spud" (begin drilling) in November.

Water depths are very shallow throughout most of the Beaufort Sea lease area, averaging eight to 30 feet inside the chain of barrier islands that parallels the coast three to 10 miles offshore. Beyond the islands, the sea floor slopes down to greater depths, up to 60 feet.

Most of the debate over Beaufort Sea exploration concerns the ability of man-made offshore structures to withstand the pressures of moving ice. Ice close inshore often freezes clear to the bottom, and therefore is quite stable. Farther out, the currents tend to affect it, and beyond the barrier islands the ice is in constant motion. Wind direction, storms, currents, and other factors carry or shove it, often with incredible force, as tales from arctic whalers and explorers veri-

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Esquimos warn of "Evu", incidents of ice override which occasionally shove pack ice clear up onto shore in unprotected locations.

The system of barrier islands is a natural phenomenon, built up by sand and silt from Arctic Slope rivers, by erosion of the shores and the direction of the current. The shallow water between the islands and shore present far less danger than the unknowns of the deeper water outside of them. The oil companies already have more than a dozen offshore exploratory wells in the Beaufort Sea, some from tracts leased as long ago as 1907 by the State of Alaska.

The State of Alaska says it will appeal the decision.