

Oil not worth the risk

Alaskans and Alaska Natives are facing one of the biggest threats to the state's resources' future that they have ever faced.

All in the name of three years oil, the Secretary of the Interior James Watt is pushing ahead with plans to lease millions of acres of the Outer Continental Shelf for oil exploration and drilling.

One look at the study that the Interior Department produced on the effects of the exploration and drilling shows that any such exploration has more than a little potential for disaster.

The words fairly leap out from the pages of the study. Whether the report is discussing commercial fishing, subsistence fishing, endangered species, cultural resources, transportation, or cultural and historical impacts, it keeps repeating the same words: considerable adverse impact.

There are other ominous words and phrases sprinkled through the hastily thrown-together amendment to the OCS impact study. They include such phrases as "unavoidable destruction to a significant amount of wildlife habitat probably resulting in local population reductions, including those of subsistence resources;" "if fresh oil spills reach sensitive biological features ... localized severe mortalities, probably selective, and functional impairment would probably occur (among marine mammals);" "would stress the infrastructure of Nome and subsistence-based villages economies and sociocultural systems of surrounding villagesinflation, housing shortages and boomtown conditions;" "will increase the adverse impacts on those sensitive breeding grounds and feeding areas," in the Norton Basin.

The report says the chance of oil spills is greatest in the Barrow Arch and Diapir Field and states that the proposed increased drilling in the Diapir Field, coupled with oil development in the Canadian Beaufort Sea "will increase the risk of adverse effects on bowhead whales from oil pollution and human disturbance. The degree and significance of this is not known."

All in all, the report spells potential disaster for the people in Alaska who make their livelihoods — commercially or on a subsistence level — from the sea or other natural resources.

And to what end does the state of Alaska suffer this? All in the name of an estimated 3 years worth of oil for the United States. Three years of oil for folks in Los Angeles and Dallas driving alone in their big cars to their air-conditioned offices. Three years of waste.

If the federal government had even shown any inclination to encourage development of alternate power sources or public transportation in the big cities of the nation, one might be more inclined to look at the oil exploration off the coast of Alaska.

But no such commitment has been forth coming. One of the first cuts made by the Reagan administration was federally subsidized development of solar power. And public transit systems are non-existent.

The federal government is asking the people of Alaska to risk untold harm to their commercial and subsistence way of life without the government making any commitments to change the wasteful way of life in the Lower 48.

The state of California, already faced with a similar exploration program which that state sees as a threat to its scenic beaches, has challenged the program. The state of Alaska, with its heavy emphasis on commercial fishing and subsistence living, has much more at stake in this matter.

North Slope Borough Mayor Jacob Adams already has vowed to fight this proposal with everything he can muster. He should be joined by other village, borough, and regional governments to fight for our way of life.