

# Sheffield supports Norton leasing delay

The Associated Press

Juneau — Gov. Bill Sheffield said Thursday he is asking for a two-year delay in oil and gas leasing on the Outer Continental Shelf in Norton Sound.

The new Democratic governor said there are "equal or better prospects" on the Department of Interior's ambitious five-year offshore leasing program.

"I've weighed that evidence against the need to prepare our fellow Alaskans in Norton Sound for oil development and I've concluded we need more time."

The decision was Sheffield's first major test in balancing the concerns of rural Alaskans who voted for him overwhelmingly — but tend to oppose oil development — and his promises to spur Alaska's economy.

He said the decision should not be interpreted as a long-term

policy. "Each of the 15 (federal) lease sales will be considered by my administration on a case-by-case basis," he promised.

Residents of the Norton Sound area on the western coast requested a five-year delay of the 2.4 million acre sale, tentatively scheduled for next March. But Sheffield said that would be too long.

"Quite frankly, the work that should have been done before this oil and gas lease sale has not been completed," Sheffield said. "The federal government, the state government, local residents and the oil and gas industry all have fallen behind in their homework."

Sheffield has appointed Esther Wunnicke, the director of the federal Minerals Management Service which is responsible for the lease sales, as the state Commissioner of Natural Resources.

"Two years from now, when the second sale of leases is planned in the Sound, my administration intends to have enough information to approve the sale and to make sure Norton Sound residents are prepared for it," Sheffield said.

The decision on whether to postpone the sale rests with Interior Secretary James Watt.

If Watt goes ahead with

the sale, Sheffield is asking that 11 tracts be deleted to provide a 12-mile buffer zone around the mouth of the Yukon River.

He also requested that if oil is discovered in the area, it be piped to shore for loading to minimize the risk of spills and provide more local jobs and taxes.

U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens said

last week that he has "no problem" with Sheffield's action and added that he thinks the concern about drilling in the Sound is primarily caused by lack of communication.

Stevens said oil companies have to understand that they must think about job training programs for area residents instead of importing outside workers to do their drilling.