Court reviews OCS drilling

By LONE E. JANSON

No decision is forthcoming as yet on a motion by three North Slope villages and two individual Eskimos asking for a preliminary injunction which would effectively halt drilling from Exxon's Duck Island well in the Beaufort Sea. The suit, brought by three Arctic Slope villages and two individual Eskimos against the Corps of Engineers, asks that the permit issued by the Corps for construction of the gravel Duck Island drilling pad and subsequent oil and gas exploration be revoked and set aside.

The permit was improperly issued, say the plaintiffs, because of improper notice, and lack of environmental impact statement, water quality certification, and consideration of the impact on endangered species.

Friday's hearing, before Judge James A. von der Heydt, was on a motion for preliminary injunction to halt drilling while these things are looked into more thoroughly. The judge declined to act immediately, and asked for more information. Briefs are to be prepared by both sides and presented to him on Friday December 15.

During the hearing the judge heard J. Scott Grundy, Regional Supervisor, Habitat Protection Section of Alaska Department of Fish and Game, outline a blowout scenario which illustrates the concerns of the department.

"On April Fool's Day, an oil blowout occurs through or surrounding the well casing and all immediate attempts to control the situation are unsuccessful The flow is comparable to a good well in the Prudhoe Bay Development Area as the uncontrolled flow is 20,000 barrels of oil per

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day (bpd).

"Exxon takes immediate action and has the support of all agencies and industry in the Prudhoe Bay Development Area (PBDA). Several approaches to kill the oil flow are simultaneously pursued by Exxon. Their last chance alternative requires the construction of a new gravel drilling pad and the drilling of a relief well.

"Because of the potential of fire; the proposed well is located four to five thousand feet from the existing well site where there would be both up wind and up current from the longshore drift should the operation continue after breakup. A convenient rig is freed in the PBDA and moved via the gravel road system and the bottom fast ice to the drill site location.

"The rig-up and supply

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● Natives

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operation consumes only seven days. The directionally drilled well proceeds extremely well; the five thousand foot target is reached within 14 days, and one day later the well is contained.."

The time lapse for this all-goes-well scenario is 40 days. If the blowout occured on May 1, breakup would occur before the blowout could be controlled and a large quantity of oil would be washed out to the sea.

Testimony on this scenario brought out that it would, indeed, be an "all-goes-well" situation. Any number of things could lengthen the time, and it is doubtful if the well could be contained before at least 60 days.

Grundy said his original recommendations for the permit called for a cessa-

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tion of drilling by March 31, well before breakup, to allow for operations to be closed down completely by that time. Later reports had the cutoff time at April 15, but the department did not protest at that time because March 31 was a conservative time. The final permit issued by the Crops contained no time constraint at all.

Other witnesses testified of their concern for the whales and other animals and sea life in the area, and about the ice conditions and the safety of the operation in general.

The judge asked for counsel on both sides of the question to present briefs by next Friday addressing specifically the question: Should the Corps of Engineers look at the production phase in preparing their Environmental Impact Statement? The EIS prepared by the Corps was a general one for the Beaufort Sea operations; Judge von der Heydt would like to see one which is site specific and looks at conditions and effects of Duck Island Well Number One.