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NOAA considers effects of Arctic oil and gas activities on marine mammals and Alaska native communities

Agency seeks comments on supplemental draft environmental impact statement

NOAA announced today that it is seeking comments on a supplemental draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for oil and gas activities in the Arctic Ocean. The draft, developed in collaboration with the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), includes analysis on how a broader range of potential offshore oil and gas activities could affect the environment, with a specific focus on marine mammals and the Alaska Native communities that depend on the animals for food and cultural traditions.

The Obama Administration's priority is ensuring that any development activities in the Arctic take place responsibly and will hold any future activities to the highest standards.

The environmental review addresses potential effects from both exploratory drilling and geological and geophysical (G&G) surveys, such as seismic surveys, in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. After releasing the initial draft environmental impact statement for public comment in December 2011, NOAA and BOEM broadened the scope of analysis in light of comments from stakeholders. The initial EIS analyzed the effects of up to two exploratory drilling programs per year in both the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. The supplemental draft EIS analyzes the effects of up to four drilling programs per year in each area. The revised draft also expands discussion of mitigation measures designed to reduce the effects of offshore oil and gas activities on marine mammals and marine mammal subsistence users.

"We know how important marine mammals are to healthy Arctic ecosystems and the people who depend on them," said Sam Rauch, deputy assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "NOAA scientists are working hard to learn as much as we can about how oil and gas activities impact marine mammals. We will continue to work with our partners to develop and put into place strong mitigation measures that will help lessen the impacts of these and other activities in our oceans."

The supplemental draft EIS looks at measures NOAA could adopt when issuing incidental take authorizations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The act provides for the incidental and unintentional take of small numbers of marine mammals by U.S. citizens, if these actions will have only a negligible effect on the species and will not reduce the availability of the marine mammals to the Alaska natives who rely on them. As part of its supplemental analysis, NOAA examined various measures to minimize potential harmful effects from sound, accidental discharge of pollutants including oil, and the presence of vessels that will be part of these oil and gas operations, such as closing areas to exploration during whale migration and feeding and during traditional whale and seal hunts.

The supplemental draft, which builds on the earlier draft EIS, is available for comment for 60 days, through Tuesday, May 28. NOAA will also host a series of public meetings during the week of April 8, 2013, to provide additional opportunities for comment. More information is available online at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/arctic.htm>.

NOAA will incorporate public comments and any new information received during the public comment period, and expects to issue the final EIS in early 2014. NOAA will use the final EIS to

help make decisions concerning incidental take authorizations that allow unintentional take of small numbers of marine mammals during oil and gas exploration activities in the U.S. Beaufort and Chukchi seas in 2014 and beyond. The EIS will also support BOEM, the agency with jurisdiction over offshore leasing and planning, in making its decisions, pursuant to the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act.

You may submit public comments via the Federal eRulemaking Portal starting Friday, March 29 at <http://www.regulations.gov> or by visiting the project page on the Office of Protected Resources [website](#). NOAA's Fisheries Service will also accept written comments mailed to

Office of Protected Resources
NOAA Fisheries
1315 East West Highway, Rm. 13115
Silver Spring MD 20910

Comments can also be faxed to 301-713-0376, Attn: Candace Nachman.

NOAA Fisheries is the lead agency for the environmental impact statement. BOEM and the North Slope Borough are cooperating agencies. The Environmental Protection Agency is serving as a consulting agency, and NOAA Fisheries is coordinating with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission as part of the co-management agreement under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

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