



OFFSHORE DEVELOPMENT IN ALASKA'S BRISTOL BAY

Wrong for the Right Whale

The Bristol Bay region in the eastern Bering Sea is known for its rich diversity of crustaceans, fish, sea birds, and marine mammals. The region provides globally important habitat for several threatened and endangered marine mammal species, including one of the most endangered whale populations found in the world, the eastern North Pacific right whale.

After nearly a quarter century of being protected from oil and gas exploration and development, Bristol Bay is now included in federal leasing plans for offshore oil and gas development. Many factors related to offshore oil and gas exploration and development pose grave threats to endangered whale populations. The eastern North Pacific right whale population is so few that the loss or injury of any cows or calves due directly or indirectly to offshore oil and gas exploration or production is unacceptable, as is the degradation of its habitat, if conservation of this population and species is to succeed. WWF is calling on the U.S. President and Congress to reinstate the offshore oil and gas moratorium for the Bristol Bay region, thereby enhancing the recovery of the North Pacific Right Whale and other marine mammals, as well as protecting the natural resources that many people depend on in the region.

WHY IS BRISTOL BAY NOW UNDER THREAT FROM OIL AND GAS?

The U.S. Congress established a moratorium on offshore oil and gas leasing in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska in 1989 following the Exxon Valdez oil spill. However, in 2003, Congress lifted this moratorium for Bristol Bay and in January 2007, President George W. Bush lifted the presidential withdrawal for the whole North Aleutian Basin Planning Area (i.e., the Bristol Bay region). The Minerals Management Service, the federal regulatory agency responsible for leasing offshore federal lands for oil and gas resource development, has scheduled a lease sale in the North Aleutian Basin in 2011.

WHY IS BRISTOL BAY IMPORTANT FOR WHALES?

Sixteen whale species occur in Bristol Bay region, seven of which are listed as "endangered" under the U.S. government's Endangered Species Act. They include the North Pacific right whale, bowhead whale, blue whale, fin whale, sei whale, humpback whale and sperm whale. These whales are still trying to recover from past commercial whaling, and the threats posed by offshore oil and gas exploration and development can seriously threaten their recovery.

The eastern North Pacific northern right whale is one of the most endangered large whale species in the world. The eastern population appears to number a few tens of animals, making it the most endangered marine mammal population in U.S. waters. Given the size of this population, the mortality of one female whale could jeopardize the future of the remaining population. Approximately 20 percent of right whale critical habitat in the eastern Bering Sea occurs within the leasing area; the remaining critical habitat is proximate to the leasing area.

HOW MIGHT OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT AFFECT WHALES?

If oil and gas exploration is allowed in the Bristol Bay area, endangered whales such as the North Pacific right whale could be exposed to noise pollution, oil spills, chemical pollution, vessel collisions, marine debris and the modification of their habitat through the introduction of non-native species.



Noise

Noise produced during offshore seismic surveys, construction of facilities and infrastructure, or during their subsequent decommissioning may cause hearing loss, stress, discomfort, injury, masking of important sounds from other whales or predators, avoidance of or departure from noisy habitat areas, cessation of vocalization, or changes in diving and breathing activity. Seismic survey activities may disrupt the feeding of pregnant cow whales and increase the potential for stress-induced abortion of the fetus or death in utero. Noise may also disturb cow-calf pairs and prematurely separate a calf from its mother, thereby disrupting learning that teaches calves migratory routes between winter and summer habitats. This is of particular concern for Northern Right whales, which must double their birth size in their first year of life. Premature weaning of calves or lengthy separation of a cow-calf pair may lead to starvation and death of the calf. Weaned calves can also be become stressed by industry noise, and may have their nutritional health compromised. Seismic survey disturbances may also cause whales to temporarily suspend migration or otherwise deflect their movements.



Right Whale

Vessel and Aircraft Traffic

Vessel traffic engaged in oil and gas industry activities may operate across the Bristol Bay area, including within critical habitat for North Pacific right whales, in summer feeding areas of North Pacific right whales and humpback whales, and in migratory pathways of gray whales. Whales may be affected by traffic either by disturbance from passing vessels or aircraft or by direct collisions with vessels. Vessel strikes have proven lethal for whales in over half of the cases for which data is available, and right whales, humpback whales, sperm whales and gray whales are among the most frequently struck vessels.

Accidental Spills

Accidental chemical spills or oil spills can be anticipated when extracting offshore oil and gas resources, and endangered whales may be exposed to spilled oil through inhalation and ingestion which can be fatal. Direct contact may also result in damage to sensitive tissues such as the eyes and lungs.

North Pacific right whales may be particularly vulnerable to oiling of baleen and ingestion of oil, due to their feeding technique of skimming zooplankton occurring chiefly at or just beneath the sea surface. Spills occurring in the Bristol Bay area can be expected to adversely affect North Pacific right whales, as well as designated critical habitat in the eastern Bering Sea.

Invasive Species

Offshore exploration and production activities in Alaska requires bringing rigs, platforms and vessels to Alaska from such areas as the Gulf of Mexico, the West Coast, or foreign waters. Species alien to Alaska may be attached to the hull structure, hitch a ride on the vessel, or be transported via ballast water. Such non-native species may appreciably alter the predator-prey dynamics (e.g., right whale prey species vs. non-native zooplankton) of Alaskan marine communities, should they become established.

WHY OIL AND GAS COULD COMPROMISE RECOVERY OF ENDANGERED WHALE POPULATIONS

Many of Alaska's whales have yet to recover from past commercial whaling, and only the eastern North Pacific gray whale population has recovered sufficiently to be delisted under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Although there is currently a moratorium on commercial whaling, these populations are still endangered by climate change, commercial shipping, naval activities, various forms of pollution (i.e, noise, biological, physical, and chemical), and in some regions of the North Pacific, commercial fishing. The addition of offshore oil and gas activities greatly compromise the potential for these populations to recover from endangerment or extinction. Offshore oil and gas activities in the Bristol Bay region may well jeopardize the recovery of the eastern North Pacific right whale population.