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THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT

Estimates of the amount of oil and gas that may be found in Arctic offshore waters vary wildly. One that is often cited – and often criticized as overly promising – is that the region contains about 30 percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas resources and about 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil resources. Two thirds of that natural gas is probably off the coast of Russia and about 60 percent of the oil lies offshore of Alaska.

Three Arctic countries are currently producing oil from Arctic or sub-Arctic waters: the United States from the Beaufort Sea, Norway from the Norwegian Sea, and Russia from offshore Sakhalin. Those countries are also moving toward more offshore exploration and development, as are Canada and Greenland (Denmark).

Oil operations can have grave impacts on Arctic ecosystems, species and people. Apart from the noise associated with ordinary operations, which itself is enough to cause behavioral changes in marine mammals and fish, the impacts of sonar and the use of underwater explosives for seismic exploration could be immensely disruptive and injurious to marine species. The construction of pipelines and harbors to serve offshore oil development can disturb benthic organisms and destroy corals.

But spills – from exploration and drilling, from pipeline ruptures, from collisions at sea – are the most obvious hazards of offshore oil development, and they are especially hazardous in the Arctic because of unique Arctic conditions. Before the Deepwater Horizon blowout off the coast of Louisiana in April 2010, the oil and gas industry and governments had grown complacent, if not smug, in asserting that the risks of an undersea blowout were minimal, especially for exploratory wells, and that the oil could be contained and cleaned up if a blowout did occur. The Arctic Council had not, and still has not, updated its Field Guide for Responding to Oil Spills in Arctic Waters since 1998, and its current Arctic Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines were written before the Deepwater Horizon fiasco and are even less stringent than the U.S. regulations in place at that time.

Deepwater Horizon made clear that the United States, with all its resources and technology, was not prepared and could not contain an oil spill even when it occurred only 48 miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, near one of the largest ports in the United States. Arctic conditions – long winter nights, storms that last weeks, fog, rain, snow, and, above all, ice – pose an infinitely more difficult situation, compounded by the great distances from ports and airports for handling equipment and crews. The inadequacy of existing practices is underscored by the difficulties Norway and Sweden currently face in handling a simple spill of fuel oil in icy waters due to the grounding of the container ship Godafoss off Norway's southern coast.

Oil and gas development will occur in Arctic waters, but it must proceed with the utmost caution and care to protect the Arctic marine environment. Toward that end Arctic coastal countries should prohibit new and expanded exploration and development until

- the most significant gaps in scientific information and baseline data regarding Arctic marine ecosystems have been identified and prioritized and programs have been undertaken to fill them
- procedures for sharing scientific data among governments and agencies are in place
- measures have been taken to maximize protection of biodiversity from hydrocarbon activities
- governments have met directly with Native communities to identify their concerns and have identified the steps they will or will not take to address them, including outstanding issues of sovereignty
- governments have put in place and tested under severe Arctic conditions the staffing, equipment, and support facilities necessary both to prevent and to effectively contain and clean up an oil spill in Arctic ice and waters.

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