

NOAA and BOEM to consider effects of broader range of Arctic oil and gas activities on marine mammals and Alaska native communities

Supplemental draft environmental impact statement to be released for comment in 2013

NOAA and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management are preparing a supplemental draft environmental impact statement (EIS) that analyzes how a broader range of potential offshore oil and gas activities in the Arctic could affect marine mammals, other resources, and Alaska Native communities. The draft will be released for public comment in early 2013. The final EIS, which is expected to be completed in early 2014, will be used to guide BOEM's decisions concerning oil and gas exploration and NOAA's decisions concerning incidental take authorizations for marine mammals.

NOAA and BOEM's new analysis follows comments received from stakeholders after release of the initial draft environmental impact statement issued in December 2011. The original draft analyzed up to two exploratory drilling programs per year in both the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. The supplemental draft EIS will analyze the effects of up to four drilling programs per year in each area – providing an opportunity to assess potential individual and cumulative impacts.

The supplemental draft EIS will look at measures NOAA could adopt as it issues incidental take authorizations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. These measures would protect marine mammals from harm and lessen any potential effects from oil and gas activities on Alaska Native communities that depend on the marine mammals for subsistence. When complete, the public will have an opportunity to comment on the findings within the supplemental draft EIS. NOAA will examine various measures to minimize any potential harmful effects from sound, accidental discharge of pollutants and presence of vessels that can be part of these oil and gas operations. The initial draft EIS laid out a number of potential mitigation measures, such as closing areas to exploration during whale migration and feeding and during traditional whale and seal hunts.

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.

In making any future regulatory decisions in the Arctic, NOAA intends to carefully consider these analyses in addition to any relevant information resulting from the Department of Interior's current review of the 2012 Arctic Offshore Drilling Program.