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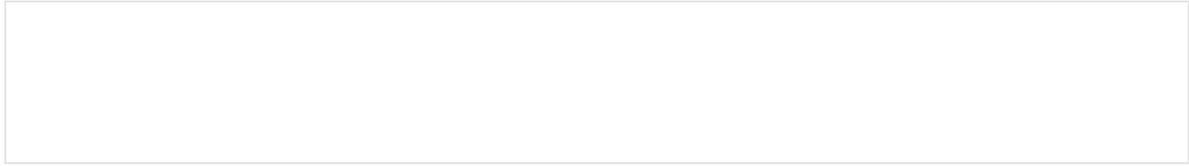
The U.S. Is Not Ready to Clean Up an Arctic Oil Spill

No viable methods exist to clean up oil from ice and drilling would occur in incredibly remote areas

By Scott Waldman, ClimateWire on July 19, 2017



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The United States is not ready to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic, the head of the Coast Guard said yesterday.

The warning comes as Congress prepares to open up more drilling in a region quickly being transformed by climate change.

Adm. Paul Zukunft said that the challenges of cleaning up the BP PLC Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico—where the conditions were much more favorable—show the extreme difficulty of Arctic oil spill recovery.



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“We saw during Deepwater Horizon, whenever the seas are over 4 feet, our ability to mechanically remove oil was virtually impossible,” he said at a Washington symposium yesterday hosted by the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. “Four-foot seas up there [in the Arctic] would probably be a pretty darned good day, so

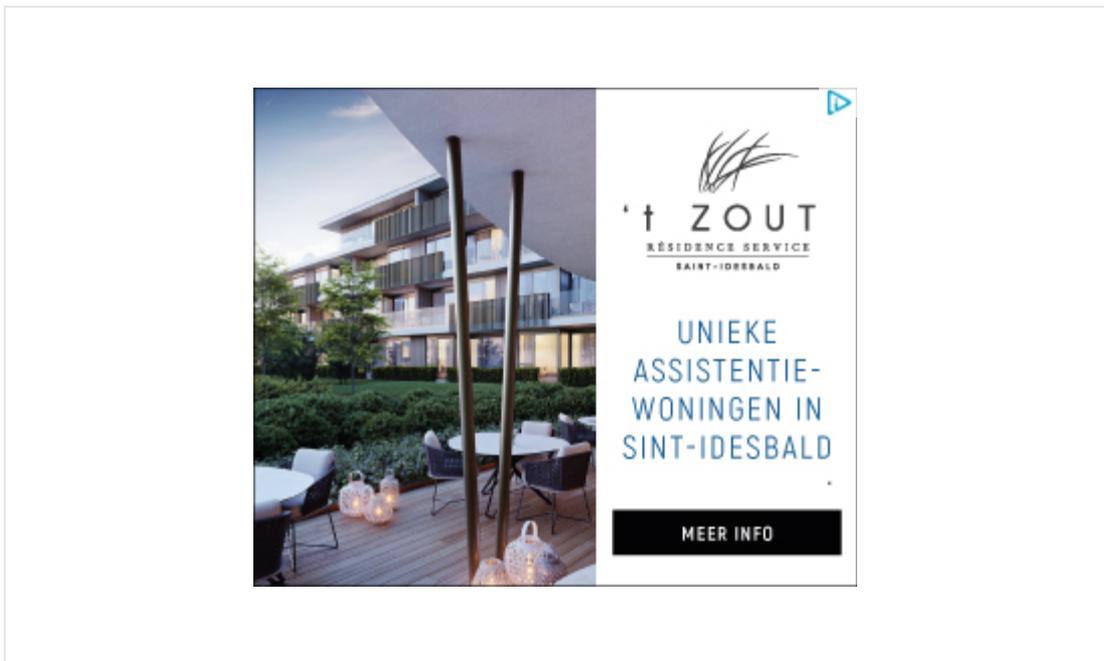
certainly environmental conditions weigh heavily in addition to just the remoteness.”

The House budget proposal, which is to be marked up today, could begin the process of opening up drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The GOP spending plan, similar to that of the White House, outlines \$5 billion that some see as coming from drilling in the refuge, which has long been a target of conservatives in Washington.

In April, President Trump signed an executive order that reversed the Obama administration’s ban on oil and gas development in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, though it is being contested in court by environmental groups. The Interior Department is also soliciting comments on a new five-year outer continental shelf leasing plan that would replace President Obama’s plan, which the Trump administration has said is too restrictive.

Some parts of the Arctic are more accessible to energy extraction because the region has already been transformed into a new state by climate change, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The region has set records for low sea ice levels and high temperatures in recent years.

The changing Arctic will increase pressure for more oil and gas drilling in regions once considered too inhospitable. Other countries, including Russia and China, have already constructed deepwater ports and are preparing for more exploration. The United States is not prepared for oil spills and does not yet even have adequate capability of icebreakers that can access hard-to-reach areas.



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The region is expected to open up oil reserves of more than 30 billion barrels of oil as well as more than 200 trillion feet of natural gas, said Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska).

Murkowski favors more oil exploration in the region, but she raised another significant issue that could affect the energy industry's push into the Arctic. She said less than 5 percent of the region has been mapped according to modern standards. Some navigation is still reliant on mapping conducted during the 18th century by British explorer Capt. James Cook, she said. In addition to increased infrastructure, ports and icebreakers, the region needs better mapping to accommodate increased traffic, she said at the NOAA event.

“At this pace we’re at, it will be a hundred years to chart the Arctic—which, given what we’re seeing in increased activity, I don’t think that works out, so we need to step it up here,” she said.

The challenges for cleaning up an oil spill in the Arctic are numerous. There are no viable methods of cleaning up oil from ice and, in addition to weather conditions, much of the area where drilling would take place is incredibly remote, said Rear

Adm. Jonathan White, the former chief oceanographer of the Navy and head of its climate change task force.

“The East Coast, West Coast, anywhere in the world except the Arctic, you can get booms, you can get platforms, you can get people and material there,” he said. “In the Arctic, it’s almost like trying to get it to the moon in some cases, especially if it’s in a season where it’s inaccessible; that really doubles, triples the difficulty of responding.”



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Serious discussion of oil drilling in the Arctic should be accompanied by proper regulations and investments in technology, said Fran Ulmer, chairwoman of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission and a former member of the BP Deepwater oil spill commission. She said it’s essential for policymakers to also work with industry to reduce risk.

“The best answer is prevention; it’s not really thinking you could have adequate capacity in the Arctic to be able to respond to major spill, because you can’t,” she said. “You can’t because [of] the lack of shore-based infrastructure; you can’t because of the size and dimension of the space you’re talking about.”

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