

The NewsRoom

Op Ed by MMS Director Randall Luthi

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The Bear Necessities

America needs energy. And Americans want protections of this Nation's magnificent wildlife. In Alaska, the Minerals Management Service, in a long-planned action, will soon lease areas in the Chukchi Sea for possible future energy exploration. Critics see the planned lease as colliding with protection of the polar bear, under consideration for listing as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Yet the two activities are compatible. Energy production can occur while maintaining strong polar bear protections.

In 2006, about 60 percent of the petroleum consumed in America was imported from foreign countries. At the same time, foreign economies are increasing their own energy consumption, reducing supplies and increasing prices on a worldwide scale. As a result, the United States relies on energy from areas that are sometimes unstable, are outside our control, and don't always have U.S. interests at heart. We need reliable, secure domestic energy production. Energy prices will only stabilize or go down if there is an increase in production.

Energy conservation and alternatives to fossil fuels can help us match fuel supplies to demand. But even the most optimistic scenarios show the United States still requiring traditional energy from oil and gas well into the future.

By law, the Minerals Management Service provides access to this Nation's offshore energy resources while regulating the energy industry to assure responsible environmental practices. Our record is good. Since the 1980s, oil spills have represented a tiny, tiny fraction of oil produced. The National Academy of Sciences, in a 2002 study, reported that over the past 20 years, less than .001 percent of the oil produced in U.S. waters has spilled. The same study reported that 150 times more oil enters the ocean every day from natural cracks in the ocean floor than from oil and gas activities.

For the Chukchi Sea sale, exploration and initial development will occur only with the approval of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Energy exploration activities will only take place in open water—at least 25 miles from shore. Although a spill is unlikely, MMS recognizes the potential for a spill and requires industry to have containment and recovery equipment on standby.

Leasing is just a first step in the energy development process. Actual production in the Chukchi Sea realistically is 10-15 years in the future—and will not occur without many environmental reviews, public commentary, and application of environmental protections.

Protections for the polar bear are a long-standing part of this process. Under the Marine Mammals Protection Act, the bear currently receives regulatory protections even stricter than those available under the Endangered Species Act. Companies—and others—must protect bear dens. No action is permitted that has more than a negligible impact on the bears. Should the bear be listed as a threatened species, all the exploration and potential activities will only occur after meeting the regulatory requirements of that listing.

Bear protections and other environmental measures result from careful study and scientific assessments. Over the past 30 years, MMS has funded nearly \$300 million for environmental studies in Alaska waters and scientific research of marine mammals, including the polar bear. Annually since 2000, we have benefited from 30 to 40 environmental studies, some focused specifically on polar bears. We now know more about the bear and its habitat requirements, which will help in the long-term survival of the species.

The long-planned Chukchi Sea sale was included in both the 2002-2007 Oil and Gas Leasing Program and again in the 2007-2012 Program. Both programs were subjected to rigorous public

scrutiny and provided to Congress, as required by law. Congress did not take action to disapprove either program.

Our decision comes down to the bare necessities: Where do we want to get our energy? Having a domestic supply is far more reliable and secure than relying upon foreign sources. Can we develop domestic supplies and provide protection for the environment and wildlife, including polar bears? Yes, we can and should.

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