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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Arctic Ocean Oil Reviews Soft-Pedaled Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Dangers to Wildlife Minimized to Keep Lease Sales on Schedule

WASHINGTON, DC - February 13 - Environmental impact assessments used to justify opening vast tracts of Arctic waters in the last six years to oil exploration downplayed the long-term effects of the devastating Exxon Valdez oil spill, according to documents released today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). Analyses by Interior Department scientists about the impacts of a large spill on Alaskan fish populations were re-written by non-scientist managers amid concerns that the findings would delay the issuance of new leases.

The 1989 Exxon Valdez tanker spill took place in remote waters of the Prince William Sound where clean-up response was severely limited. That experience would appear to be particularly pertinent to the Bush administration drive to open up the even more remote Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas to oil and gas development. As in Prince William Sound, response to a major Arctic spill would be constrained by location, weather and lack of ready containment equipment and even further hampered by arctic sea ice.

Research published in the last decade shows that the Exxon Valdez spill created long-term harm to fish populations, such as herring and pink salmon, by impairing reproduction, growth, feeding and migratory patterns. Subsistence fishermen and hunters were also negatively affected.

The original 2003 Beaufort Sea Multi-Sale Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the first Bush-era lease sales selectively used studies on the Exxon Valdez spill and did not even consider the actual recovery period of impacted fish populations. Interior management feared that later inclusion of troublesome data would make earlier lease sales legally vulnerable and slow down reviews for proposed leases.

“If Interior admits that its earlier environmental reviews only considered partial information then its whole Alaska Outer Continental Shelf house of cards comes tumbling down” stated PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch, noting that the agency touted the comprehensive quality of its EIS in last week’s multi-billion dollar bidding for a Chukchi Sea lease. “How could these supposedly ‘comprehensive’ reviews overlook nearly half a billion dollars of research into the effects of Exxon Valdez?”

Interior sought to keep lease sales on schedule by doing abbreviated Environmental Assessments that tiered off the earlier deficient Multi-Sale EIS. However, if one of these Environmental Assessments were to find a significant adverse impact, then by law, a full EIS would have to be done for that sale, adding months or years to the schedule. Thus, in

July 2006, Interior substantially altered the impact analysis of fisheries biologist Jeff Childs for an Environmental Assessment of a proposed Beaufort Sea lease sale. Childs had reported that:

“Based on the information reviewed [citations omitted] a large oil spill impacting estuarine or intertidal habitats utilized by capelin or other fishes is likely to result in significant adverse effects on local populations requiring three or more generations to recover. A large oil spill impacting essential fish habitat utilized by early life history stages of pink salmon is likely to result in significant adverse effects on local populations requiring three or more generations to recover to their former status.”

The “significant adverse effects” finding would trigger the need for a full EIS and force a more complete analysis of the effects of oil spills in Arctic waters. Moreover, the significant adverse effects finding would also trigger additional consultation with the national marine Fisheries Services and likely lead to adopting additional mitigation measures to minimize harm to Pacific salmon essential habitat.

In staff meetings, Interior managers repeatedly reminded scientists that the agency had committed to meet the timetable of lease sales agreed to with the oil industry.

“How can Interior say with a straight face that a large oil spill in the Arctic Ocean would not be significant?” asked Ruch, noting that the quality of agency environmental reviews is now the subject of multiple court challenges. “On issue after issue, scientists were warned by Interior managers to avoid reporting any significant adverse impacts from Arctic oil leasing activities regardless of the evidence.”

[Read the suppressed analysis of spill impacts on “Fishes and Essential Fish Habitat”](#)

[Compare the official Alaska OCS reviews](#)

[View the statement by MMS Director touting “comprehensive” reviews](#)

[See the flow of incriminating internal e-mails and documents coming out of Interior](#)

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