



COMMITTEE for ORIGINAL PEOPLES ENTITLEMENT

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DRILLING FOR OIL AND GAS IN THE BEAUFORT SEA

The Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement today expressed its concern over the prospect of offshore drilling for oil and gas in the Beaufort Sea. COPE's Board of Directors met at Paulatuk last weekend and directed that a request be made to the Federal Government for full consultation before offshore drilling is allowed to proceed. COPE considers the Beaufort Sea to be a high hazard area and is deeply concerned about the effects that oil spills or well blowouts could have on the marine environment and on the native settlements that border on, or are close to, the Sea.

Native people of this region have long been afraid of the possible environmental impact of offshore drilling but until lately have not been able to get much information about it. Recently, COPE asked Dr. D. H. Pimlott, University of Toronto zoologist, presently working in the Western Arctic as a resource person to native organizations, to prepare a report on the present status of offshore drilling proposals. Dr. Pimlott's work here is sponsored

by the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee. The report, entitled "Offshore Drilling in the Beaufort Sea", documents the oil industries' plans for offshore drilling, the federal government's procedures for granting permission for such activity, and the current state of environmental knowledge of the impact of offshore drilling.

The report makes three outstanding points:

1. That offshore drilling represents an important new phase of northern oil exploration, involving unknown but possibly very significant risks to the environment. This environment, probably the most hazardous the oil industry has had to face anywhere in the world, could be very seriously damaged by accidental blowouts.
2. That this new phase of exploration, which has been approved in principle by the Federal Cabinet, has been shrouded in secrecy. No local communities or native organizations in the North have been informed or consulted and no information has been provided to the Canadian public.
3. That the government's proposed program of environmental impact research is highly inadequate. In particular, only one year has been allowed for research, which is not enough. It appears the Federal Cabinet has been misinformed about the potential hazards of offshore oil drilling, and that emergency procedures may not be adequate.

The Board of Directors of COPE is extremely disturbed by this report. It would appear that balanced, long-term development for the benefit of all northerners and indeed all Canadians is being sacrificed for immediate profit and a panic reaction to the energy crisis. COPE considers the risk of blowouts and oil spills in the Arctic Ocean, especially on or under the sea ice, to be unacceptable at the present time. We have no evidence that there are adequate precautions for blowouts late in the season, or under conditions of heavy, drifting ice. There are several communities in this region which are directly or indirectly dependent on the sea. All around the edge of the Beaufort Sea the native people are trapping foxes or hunting white whales and seals and catching fish that run in from the Sea. In the winter the people from Holman Island, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour and Tuktoyaktuk travel far out onto the sea hunting polar bears. Some of the permit blocks where drilling will be done first are right in the area where the people from Tuktoyaktuk hunt polar bears. Others lie close to the coast in areas which are critical to seals, white whales and waterfowl.

It is appalling that neither COPE, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, Settlement Councils, nor hunters and trappers associations in the region have been consulted. COPE does not consider offshore drilling to be just another exploration operation to be approved when the time comes, as with land-based drilling. This is a new phase of exploration requiring the most careful consideration and precaution at the outset. COPE considers the record of the government and industry in taking adequate environmental precautions;

in having adequate emergency procedures; and in enforcing existing environmental regulations, to be unsatisfactory. It is unacceptable that the Beaufort Sea, which is so important to the people of this region, to say nothing of the global population, should be subjected to such a risk, especially under the authority of an administration which has a proven record of consulting with native people and informing the Canadian public, after the fact.

COPE's Board of Directors has requested the Federal Government to begin immediate consultation with COPE and Inuit Tapirisat of Canada on the whole matter of offshore drilling in Arctic waters. The objective should be to develop an agreement which will include adequate safeguards for the interests of native people and their environment.

There is no desire to obstruct exploration unnecessarily but the vital interests of the native people must be protected. Verbal promises will not do. Sam Raddi, President of COPE has already written to the Ministers of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and of Environment Canada asking them to delay permission for offshore drilling for at least three years, in order that proper studies can be conducted.

On behalf of the native people of the Northwest Territories, COPE asks for the support of the Canadian public in resolving this serious matter. While native people are in a position to be most directly effected, offshore drilling in this critical area warrants world attention and consideration. COPE particularly requests conservation, environmental and scientific organizations to consider the potential implications of this new phase of exploration for oil and gas in the Arctic.

letter to Davis?