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Obama backs more Alaska oil drilling, Salazar says

Sean Cockerham | The Anchorage Daily News

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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar came to Anchorage on Monday and said the Obama administration supports more oil drilling in Alaska, potentially including offshore Arctic development.

Salazar joined Alaska Sen. Mark Begich and Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed for a meeting with Alaska business people and said the president's feeling toward Arctic offshore drilling is "Let's take a look at what's up there and see what it is we can develop."

But any Arctic oil development must be done carefully, he said. Salazar said the Arctic lacks needed infrastructure for responding to potential offshore oil spills and cited painful lessons from the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico last year.

"Not the mightiest companies with multibillion-dollar pockets were able to do what needed to be done in a timely basis, and the representations of preparation simply turned out not to be true from the oil companies that had a legal obligation to shut down that kind of an oil spill. ...," Salazar told Alaska reporters. "When you look at the Arctic itself, we recognize that there are different realities -- the ocean is a much shallower ocean, conditions are very different than we had in the Gulf of Mexico. (But) there are challenges that are unique to the Arctic."

Salazar said a step toward a solution is "having an agency within the United States government and Interior, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Regulation, that can in fact do its job." The agency is the successor to the Minerals Management Service, which was discredited after the Gulf spill.

"Secondly, there will be conditions that will be imposed on whatever drilling that does occur in either the Beaufort or the Chukchi on down the road that will incorporate the lessons that have been learned (from the Gulf spill)," he said. "And thirdly, there is also a recognition we have that there is additional work that needs to be done with respect to the understanding of the Arctic, the science and the need for having effective oil spill response."

Begich, a Democrat, said he was encouraged that the administration is taking steps toward Arctic development while working out what Coast Guard and other resources would be needed in the area.

Last week the Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement gave Shell a conditional exploration permit that covers a program that would drill four wells over two years in Camden Bay of the Beaufort Sea, due north of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. But the permit is contingent on many other federal permits and approvals, including oil-spill response plans and marine mammal protection.

Shell is also seeking authorization to drill in the Chukchi Sea.

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