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## GAO: Alaska unit inconsistent with oil, gas lease guidelines

**MMS CRITICISM: With leasing in basin halted, report lacks punch.**By ERIKA BOLSTAD  
ebolstad@adn.comPublished: April 7th, 2010 09:21 PM  
Last Modified: April 7th, 2010 09:22 PM

WASHINGTON -- The Minerals Management Service was inconsistent in following federal environmental guidelines as it weighed the risks of oil and gas leases in the North Aleutian Basin, the federal government's internal watchdog said Wednesday.

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The Alaska MMS office also failed to share proprietary industry information among its own staff conducting the environmental reviews, the Government Accountability Office report found.

The practice hindered the agency's ability to complete sound environmental analyses under the National Environmental Policy Act, the GAO found. It also was inconsistent with a 2008 agency directive requiring that such information be available to staffers making environmental assessments.

Because leasing has been halted in the North Aleutian Basin, the report lacks the punch it might have had if MMS were still considering oil and gas leases in the area. Last week, President Barack Obama announced that while he supports development of some oil and gas leases in Arctic waters off Alaska's northern coast, he won't allow drilling in federal

waters near Bristol Bay. Those waters in the North Aleutian Basin are a "national treasure," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said last week.

But they feel their report has relevance for future operations in Alaska's MMS office, said Mark Gaffigan of the GAO's natural resources and environment team that conducted the investigation.

"We think it's relative," he said.

Gaffigan noted that the Alaska MMS office has said it will create a Web-based handbook to ensure it follows the guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act. The office also has pledged to follow the 2008 requirement that proprietary information be shared with all employees involved in environmental reviews.

Environmentalists said Wednesday they remain concerned about the agency's handling of leases that will go forward in Alaska, including Shell's Arctic leases. The Dutch oil giant will drill several exploration wells in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas this summer, if the federal government grants the final permits and the company withstands legal challenges from environmental groups and several North Slope villages.

"GAO confirmed what we have known all along: There is something rotten in Alaska," said Cindy Shogan, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League. "Good decision-making requires solid information, and that has been missing from the Alaska MMS decision-making for some time."

MMS officials in Alaska and Washington did not respond to phone calls or e-mails requesting comment.

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**largo** wrote on 04/07/2010 03:15:52 PM:

Like I've said , Shell will never produce the first barrel of oil out of the Chukchi Sea, these Conservationist will make sure of that. The funny thing is , almost everyone of them draw either a State or Federal check, one way or other the tax payers bank roll the Bunny Huggers.

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**graykeeper** wrote on 04/07/2010 03:11:54 PM:

Very interesting. This is the very same legal arguement being presented by the North Alaskan villages and environmental groups regarding the Beaufort and Chukchi Sea leases. I suppose it would be improper for the courts to consider a "rotten" lease from the same agency and timeframe having any bearing on the seperate Arctic Ocean leases. The judges might have to fall back on the old stink test to determine who is right on that one.

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