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The Arctic After the Gulf

There is an important way for President Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to show they are absorbing the lessons of the gulf oil spill and to reaffirm their pledge to proceed cautiously with offshore drilling in the future. That is to withhold the permits Shell Oil needs to proceed with a highly controversial drilling project in the Arctic Ocean.

The company owns two leases in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas — two of the most remote and frigid waters in North America. It hopes to begin exploratory drilling there as early as July. But it does not have final permits, which Mr. Salazar has the authority to deny.

The various laws governing offshore oil and gas activity and the National Environmental Policy Act allow for the suspension of activities whenever there is “significant new information relevant to environmental concerns.” There is no doubt that the gulf spill has provided significant new information — particularly about the inability of industry and government to respond to a huge blowout — as well as compelling evidence of the damage that a major spill can inflict.

This information is especially relevant to the Arctic, where responding to even a small spill would be complicated by ice, forbidding weather and a lack of onshore support.

Mr. Salazar has already expressed strong reservations about the environmental dangers of drilling in the Arctic. The administration’s plan for exploring the outer continental shelf, unveiled in March, made clear that Alaska’s Bristol Bay, a particularly rich fishery, was permanently off limits. It postponed new leasing in the rest of the Arctic pending a lengthy environmental review. The two Shell leases, signed during the Bush administration, were allowed to stand.

The company has argued that the wells it plans to drill in the Beaufort and the Chukchi would be in shallower waters than the BP well in the gulf. It also insists that it is well equipped to respond to any emergency. The government cannot take that on faith, especially in such a difficult and ecologically fragile environment.

Mr. Obama has asked a special commission to undertake a six-month investigation of the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. It makes no sense to allow new drilling to proceed anywhere until this investigation is complete — until the lessons of the gulf are fully absorbed and new, more effective policies are in place to prevent another disaster. Until then, Mr. Salazar should put Shell's Alaska wells on hold.