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Court Backs Oil Project

By **WILLIAM YARDLEY**

A federal appeals court on Thursday rejected an effort by environmental and Native American groups to stop exploratory [oil](#) drilling off the coast of Alaska that could begin this summer.

The decision, by a three-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, rejected several claims by the groups, including that the [United States Minerals Management Service](#) did not adequately consider the possibility that the project could cause a large [oil spill](#) in the remote Arctic.

The project is led by [Shell Oil](#), which paid \$2.1 billion in 2008 for rights to drill in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, off Alaska's north coast.

The project could still be delayed. Last week, Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) ordered a halt to all new offshore projects while his department reviewed safety measures for the work in light of the spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As part of the review, the minerals service asked Shell to explain ways it could improve its ability to prevent and respond to a spill. Shell is supposed to respond by Tuesday. The [Interior Department](#) report is to be submitted to the White House by May 28.

Erik Grafe, a lawyer for [Earthjustice in Alaska](#), one of the groups that challenged the Shell plan, said the court's decision left the fate of the project "squarely in Secretary Salazar's and Obama's hands."