

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

INUUKSHUK AT DUSK OVERLOOKING THE SYLVIA GRINNELL RIVER, SYLVIA GRINNELL TERRITORIAL PARK, IQALUIT, NUNAVUT, CANADA © ANDREWS, WRIGHT / WWF-CANADA

“The people of the North have the right to a sustainable future. WWF will work with communities on projects such as habitat-friendly renewable energy that enhance community wellbeing and are in line with traditional values.”

—Paul Crowley, WWF VP, Arctic Program

1976
The federal government insists any company that wants to drill in the Beaufort Sea must prove it can drill a relief well in the same season

April 2014
Imperial Oil asks the NEB to consider alternatives to the same-season relief well requirement; Chevron follows suit in May

July 2014
The NEB agrees to review proposals from the two oil companies

August 2014
In a nine-page letter to the NEB, WWF and Ecojustice make the case for requiring a same-season relief well

December 2014
Chevron puts its drilling plans for the Beaufort Sea on hold indefinitely

June 2015
Imperial Oil and its partners abandon their offshore drilling plans for the Beaufort

ARCTIC WIN: OFFSHORE DRILLING PLANS PUT ON ICE

As WWF's 2014 oil spill modelling arcticspills.wwf.ca shows, an oil rig blowout in the Beaufort Sea could contaminate hundreds of square kilometres of ocean, harm countless marine creatures and wash ashore in communities as far away as Alaska and Nunavut.

Spilled oil is difficult to contain at the best of times. It's even more challenging in the Arctic. If a blowout can't be stemmed before winter, it will continue spewing oil unchecked under the sea ice month after month.

That's why WWF has been such a strong advocate of same-season relief wells. Since 1976, any oil company that wants to drill in the Arctic has to prove that if a blowout occurred, it could drill a relief well to stop the blowout before the winter ice set in.

Modern oil rigs have many safety measures designed to prevent a blowout—so-called source control and containment equipment. But that's not enough when the stakes are so high. A relief well is the fallback that doesn't fail. And in the pristine and fragile Arctic, failure cannot be an option.

Bowhead whale

Any offshore oil drilling in the Arctic must meet strict safety requirements—including same-season relief wells—to protect wildlife that spend their summers in the Beaufort Sea, like the bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*).

These underwater giants grow up to 20 metres long—the length of two full-size school buses—and can live 200 years or more. After centuries of over-hunting, their numbers are now slowly increasing.

According to WWF's arcticspills.wwf.ca, a blowout in the Beaufort Sea would sweep oil across key parts of bowhead habitat. Polar bears, belugas, sea ducks, seals, and shorebirds would also suffer.



BOWHEAD WHALE JUST UNDER ICE, ARCTIC © NATUREPL.COM / MARTHA HOLMES / WWF

“Same-season relief wells are the last line of defence against a blowout that could last into the winter,” says Rob Powell, lead specialist of WWF's priority conservation programs.

However, last year Chevron and Imperial Oil pushed for alternatives; they asked the National Energy Board to exempt them from the same-season relief well requirement.

Over the past year, with the support of our donors and working with Ecojustice, WWF took action to make the case for same-season relief wells to the energy board. We vigorously demonstrated how this requirement follows international best practices and how a relief well proved crucial to stopping the Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010—a disaster that occurred in a far more forgiving environment than the Arctic.

Before the National Energy Board made a ruling, both Chevron and Imperial Oil pulled the plug on their Arctic exploration plans. For the foreseeable future, that spells an end to exploratory drilling in the Beaufort Sea, and the requirement for same-season relief wells stays on the books.