



Marine Conservation and Immediate Needs in the Arctic

The Obama administration should pursue a variety of actions to protect and restore the health of ocean ecosystems, fishery sustainability, and marine biodiversity. In order to promote the value and productivity of these ecosystems and resources and to support dependent communities and economies, both within the US and internationally, the administration will need to address the main threats to resource health and sustainability – intensive fishing pressure and the structural damage caused by it, global warming and ocean acidification, and other impacts associated with pollution, coastal development, invasive species, and a range of extractive uses. To address these impacts, the administration must take action at the national, regional and international levels on issues associated with marine governance, climate/ocean acidification mitigation and adaptation, sustainable fisheries management, including development of aquaculture standards where needed, and specific species conservation needs, including corals and sea turtles.

As an immediate set of actions, the President should direct his attention to the Arctic, including the Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering Seas, including Bristol Bay. **The Obama administration should take steps to create a deliberate and rational approach to Arctic governance, both through development and implementation of an international Arctic Framework Convention and of a domestic Comprehensive Arctic Conservation and Energy Plan.** Domestic and international resource planning and governance reform in this region is crucial not only because of the conservation value of the Arctic, but because of the region's geostrategic importance, given that up to 10 countries can lay claim to the area. Overall, Arctic governance reform is crucial to US sovereignty and security as well as ecosystem and resource sustainability.

Scientists now believe the Arctic may become ice-free in summer as early as 2013. It is essential that a governance regime be developed and put in place in advance of major industrial development permitted by these drastic reductions in ice coverage. In order to protect our sovereignty and security as well as the health of Arctic resources, the United States must provide leadership in the creation of a strengthened system of Arctic governance. Specifically, President Obama should begin the process to negotiate a new Arctic Framework Convention by the end of 2012. The convention should be guided by sound science to establish safe levels of exploitation and commerce by all nations using the Arctic and should rely on and emphasize tools and perspectives such as marine spatial planning, ecosystem-based management, the precautionary approach, transparency, and multi-stakeholder participation. The Framework should govern activities including oil and gas development, fisheries management, and shipping safety and pollution.

In addition, President Obama should take immediate action to halt the current aggressive course of oil and gas development in the Arctic until a deliberate, rational Comprehensive Arctic Conservation and Energy Plan can be designed and implemented. The Bush administration greatly accelerated the pace of oil and gas leasing, onshore and off, despite a general lack of



information about Arctic ecosystem function, the absence of capacity to respond to oil spills in remote, ice-filled areas, the significant value of fisheries in the region, particularly in Bristol Bay, and consideration of the cumulative impact of these activities with other, ongoing threats to Arctic ecosystems and resources such as global warming and ocean acidification. In total, the most recent five-year plan opened up a record 80 million acres to oil and gas development in OCS areas of the Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering Seas – as compared to the previous five-year plan which only included 9.4 million acres in Beaufort alone.

The Obama administration should establish a “time out” on all further Federal oil and gas activity in the Arctic, including, to the extent allowed by law, areas previously leased, until a scientific assessment of the potential impacts is completed and a plan for protecting affected areas (including a real, funded capacity to deal with oil spills) is in place. This could be done through the formal Presidential withdrawal of areas open to oil and gas leasing or more informally as a signal that the President will approach the issue deliberately and comprehensively. The time out should: 1) halt new proposed lease sales in the Arctic; 2) allow for full environmental review of Arctic exploration activities, and 3) correct illegal ESA and MMPA actions for polar bear and walrus. Bristol Bay should receive particular attention and protection, given its importance for commercial fishing and seafood supply. The risk of damage from oil and gas development in Bristol Bay is too great: the fisheries of Bristol Bay and the Bering Sea are valued at almost \$2.2 billion annually, while the quoted figure from MMS on the value of off shore drilling is only \$7.7 billion over 25-40 years.

During this time out period, the Obama administration should convene an interagency task force, comprised of representatives from NOAA, MMS, BLM, the Coast Guard, EPA, and the Army Corps of Engineers, to develop a Comprehensive Arctic Conservation and Energy Plan. Such a plan should be based on a full scientific assessment by a group of independent scientific experts, such as the National Research Council, of the health, biodiversity, and functioning of Arctic ecosystems. This assessment should ultimately guide decisions about if, when, where, and how oil and gas development should proceed. The assessment should include an evaluation of the potential impacts of oil and gas development on protected species and should provide the basis for promulgating appropriate rules to protect those species and their habitats as part of a broader wildlife initiative. Permanent protection should be given immediately to those limited areas where sufficient scientific information already exists, including the onshore Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Bristol Bay, and the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area.

Development of an Arctic Framework Convention and a Comprehensive Arctic Conservation and Energy Plan represent a unique and critical set of actions that the Obama administration can and should take to avoid possible irreparable economic and ecologic damage to one of the most valuable and sensitive regions in the world. These leadership actions represent a timely and crucial first step in what will hopefully be an integrated set of efforts to protect the Arctic, marine ecosystems and regions more broadly, and dependent economies and communities.