

Oil majors to share environmental data with NOAA

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Three major oil companies today agreed to share data on the Arctic environment with the Commerce Department to aid its oversight of energy development in the region.

The memorandum of agreement signed this afternoon in Anchorage, Alaska, between Shell Exploration and Production Co., ConocoPhillips Co. and Statoil USA E&P Inc. and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration comes as the agency evaluates Shell's plan to drill for oil in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas next summer. NOAA must grant marine mammal authorizations for Shell's plan to proceed.

NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco and Sen. Mark Begich (D-Alaska) attended the signing ceremony, according to an industry source.

"Changes are occurring in the Arctic, both in terms of the ecosystem and in human use," said a draft of the agreement. "With reduction in sea ice, critical new environmental, economic, and national security issues are emerging that have immediate and long-term impacts for human lives, livelihoods, and coastal communities and the environment."

The draft states that parties to the agreement will share data on meteorology, coastal and ocean currents, circulation, waves, sea ice studies, biological science, and hydrographic services and mapping.

The draft cites estimates that the Arctic holds nearly a third of the world's undiscovered natural gas and about 13 percent of its undiscovered oil resource. Each of the companies that signed the agreement holds leases in Arctic waters and is conducting scientific studies and preparing exploration plans, the draft said.

Natalie Lowman, a spokeswoman with ConocoPhillips Alaska, said the three oil companies have been partnering on multidisciplinary studies of the Arctic outer continental shelf since 2008. In the Chukchi, the companies have studied marine mammals, seabirds, fish, oceanography and the chemical composition of sediments and acoustics, among other things, she said.

"It's a baseline data set that we think will help make informed decisions regarding resource development in the Arctic," she said. "This is a way to share this with government agencies and other stakeholders."

NOAA also participated in a round table with Cook Inlet oil and gas stakeholders today to discuss ways to streamline its permitting process for oil and gas rigs in the region. NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is tasked with protecting Cook Inlet beluga whales under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.