

Alaskan drilling will assess gas hydrate

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Drilling has started on an Alaskan North Slope well to assess the United States' largest potential fossil energy resource: gas hydrate.

U.S. Department of Energy scientists say gas hydrate is an ice-like solid that results from the trapping of methane molecules -- the main component of natural gas -- within a lattice-like cage of water molecules. Dubbed the "ice that burns," the substance releases gaseous methane when it melts.

The size of the global gas hydrate resource is staggering, holding more ultimate energy potential than all other fossil fuels combined, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, which estimates the deposits contain 200,000 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

The government said the well is being drilled from an ice pad, constructed to protect the sensitive arctic tundra.

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