

UK lawmakers seek moratorium on Arctic drilling

September 20 2012, by David Stringer

(AP)—International governments should seek a moratorium on offshore drilling in the Arctic amid concern an oil spill in the region could cause catastrophic environmental damage, British lawmakers said Thursday.

The Environmental Audit Committee of Britain's House of Commons urged action to halt [oil and gas drilling](#) in the Arctic until new safeguards—including vastly increased financial guarantees and universal standards on disaster response—are put in place.

Legislators on the panel also called for an internationally recognized nature sanctuary to be created to protect at least part of the Arctic from [energy exploration](#).

Caroline Lucas, a member of the committee and the only Green Party lawmaker at Britain's Parliament, said the panel's findings came as "the race to carve up the Arctic is accelerating faster than our regulatory or technical capacity to manage it."

"The [Arctic oil](#) rush is bringing unprecedented risks to the area, and it's now clear that the consequences of any potential oil spill would be catastrophic," she said.

Recommendations by the panel are not binding on Britain's government, and in response the country's foreign ministry said only that it would consider the proposals.

Experts warned the panel that any blowout in the Arctic at the end of the summer drilling season could be disastrous, as the returning winter ice would likely severely hamper the response.

"We heard compelling evidence that if a blow-out occurred just before the dark Arctic winter returned it may not be possible to cap it until the following summer—potentially leaving oil spewing out under the ice for six months or more with devastating consequences for wildlife," said lawmaker Joan Walley, chairwoman of the committee.

In a report, legislators said that the fact Arctic drilling locations are remote means resources to manage accidents are likely to be difficult to access or unavailable. Because shorelines are sparsely populated, it would also be more difficult to detect evidence of a spill.

"The infrastructure to mount a big clean-up operation is simply not in place and conventional oil spill response techniques have not been proven to work in such severe conditions," Walley said.

Legislators called on Britain to lobby the Arctic Council—an intergovernmental forum of the eight Arctic nations, including the United States and Canada—to craft a universal standard on [disaster response](#).

The panel also suggested a "much higher, preferably unlimited, financial liability regime for oil and gas operations."

Britain's energy and climate change ministry said that, given the U.K.'s lack of "expertise or experience of Arctic issues," nations in the region should take the lead.

Charles Emmerson, an energy expert at the London-based Chatham House think tank, said it was "extremely unlikely" that nations

competing over Arctic resources would agree to a single regulatory framework.

Richard Steiner, an Alaska-based marine conservation consultant who gave evidence to the committee via video link, urged the eight Arctic coastal nations and the U.N. to adopt the report's recommendations.

"It represents the first time a governmental body has really and honestly suggested what needs to happen to manage the Arctic responsibly," he said. "The U.K. Parliamentary body has proposed a realistic road-map for Arctic stewardship."

Environmental groups strongly oppose Arctic offshore drilling, claiming oil companies have not demonstrated the ability to clean up spilled crude in ice. Operating in one of the world's most hostile marine environments is a risk to its polar bears, walrus and endangered whales, the groups claim.

Shell has limited [Arctic drilling](#) off Alaska to preparation work this year after a safety system was damaged during testing.

However, Marvin Odum, head of Shell Oil Co., Royal Dutch Shell's U.S. subsidiary, insists it is optimistic about tapping into an estimated 26 billion barrels of recoverable [oil](#) and 130 trillion cubic feet (3.68 trillion cubic meters) of natural gas in U.S. Arctic waters.

In evidence to the British committee, Robert Blaauw, a senior Shell adviser on the Arctic, said energy demand over the coming decades made it necessary for companies to look to "unconventional resources" such as those in the Arctic.

The company said that it welcomed dialogue on [Arctic](#) energy exploration.

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