

Shell's foundering ship has some questioning wisdom of Arctic drilling

January 4 2013, by Sean Cockerham

Critics want a halt to offshore Arctic drilling in the wake of Shell's latest mishap in the waters off Alaska, but there's no sign the Obama administration and key members of Congress are backing off their support for drilling in the sensitive region.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) let Shell begin preparatory drilling in Alaska's [Arctic waters](#) this summer, the first time in two decades. Environmental groups on Thursday called for the administration to immediately put a stop to all permitting for Arctic offshore oil exploration as a result of Monday's grounding of Shell's drilling rig in Alaska. But Salazar isn't willing to put the permits on hold.

"The administration understands that the [Arctic environment](#) presents unique challenges, and that's why the secretary has repeatedly made clear that any approved drilling activities will be held to the highest safety and environmental standards," Salazar spokesman Blake Androff said Thursday. "The department will continue to carefully review permits for any activity, and all proposals must meet our rigorous standards."

Salazar has not given Shell permission to drill deep enough to actually hit oil. The company hopes to get that approval this summer.

The chairman of the House Resources Committee, Washington state Republican Doc Hastings, is a drilling supporter, and that hasn't changed.

"Rather than jumping to conclusions, he believes the focus right now

needs to be on safely resolving the situation," said Hastings' spokeswoman, Jill Strait.

Shell is taking some heat. A group of 46 [House Democrats](#) released a statement Thursday saying they want answers from the Coast Guard and the Interior Department about the rig incident. "This is the latest in a series of alarming blunders ...," said the House Sustainable Energy and Environmental Coalition Caucus.

But the group represents a small minority of the 435-member House of Representatives, which is controlled by Republicans.

Shell's drilling rig Kulluk broke free from its towline Monday after running into a winter storm in the Gulf of Alaska. The rig grounded off Sitkalidak Island, just south of Kodiak Island, and an attempt to try a salvage operation is being planned. There are worries about a potential spill of the estimated 155,000 gallons of diesel fuel and other petroleum products on board the vessel.

The vessel that was towing the rig is owned and run by the politically connected Louisiana company Edison Chouest Offshore. The company was the top campaign contributor in the most recent election cycle for Hastings, as well as Alaska Republicans Rep. Don Young and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, according to the Center for Responsive Politics in Washington. Edison Chouest also is among the top donors to Alaska Democratic Sen. Mark Begich, who, like the rest of Alaska's delegation, is an ardent supporter of the [Arctic drilling](#).

The grounding follows a September incident in which the spill containment dome on Shell's response barge, the Arctic Challenger, was, according to an internal email by a federal regulator, "crushed like a beer can" during testing in Washington state's Puget Sound.

And a different Shell [drilling rig](#), the Noble Discoverer, dragged anchor in Alaska's Dutch Harbor in July, had a small fire in its smokestack and was cited for safety and pollution issues.

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat who is the incoming chairman of the Senate Energy and Commerce Committee, isn't ready to put the hammer on Shell.

"The Coast Guard and [Interior Department](#) will be investigating the causes of this incident, so it's too soon to draw any firm conclusions," Wyden said in a prepared statement. "But as I've said before, I plan to look at drilling safety rules this year to see if regulators are doing enough to make sure offshore drilling operations aren't putting lives or the environment at risk."

Murkowski is the top Republican on the Senate energy committee and has shown signs of working closely with Wyden.

"The extreme winter weather and high seas in the Gulf of Alaska would have been a challenge for any vessel," said Murkowski spokesman Robert Dillon. "This is a maritime transportation incident, not a [drilling](#) accident. There are certainly lessons to be learned from this event, but it's irresponsible to use any pretext to try to stop the development of the energy our nation runs on."

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