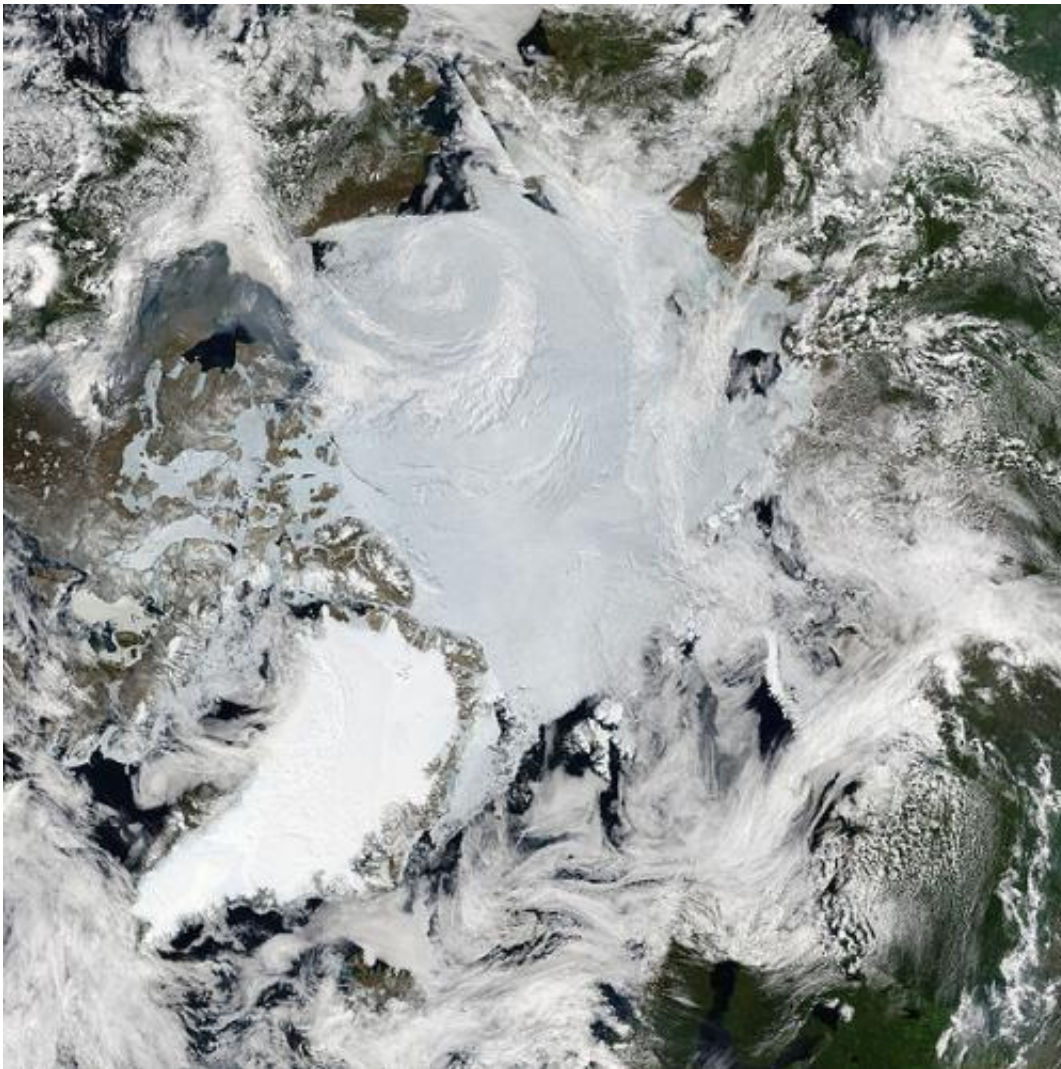


NASA weighs in on petroleum development in Arctic Ocean

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Mosaic of images of the Arctic by MODIS. Credit: NASA

The federal agency that oversees offshore petroleum leasing has received comment on Arctic Ocean drilling from a surprise source—NASA.

Alaska's Energy Desk reports that the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management asked for comment as the Trump administration considers a 2019 lease sale in the Beaufort Sea.

A letter from NASA says Beaufort Sea drilling rigs could be affected by launches from its only high-latitude rocket range.

The space administration funds Poker Flat Research Range outside Fairbanks. The high-latitude rocket range for decades has been operated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"What we're known for is doing research on the aurora," Poker Flat director Kathe Rich said.

Scientists launch rockets that pass through the aurora and sometimes land great distances from the launch site.

"If we're looking for something that's fairly far north, it's going to come down in the Beaufort Sea or the Arctic Ocean, one or the other," Rich said.

The NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in April sent a letter to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management estimating that 70 rocket parts have landed in the Beaufort Sea since the 1960s.

NASA expressed concern that future oil and gas development in the Beaufort Sea could result in the need to protect additional people and property during launches.

As [scientists](#) use higher-performing rockets nowadays, more could land

in the Beaufort, according to NASA.

The chance of [rocket](#) parts crashing onto oil rigs is extremely unlikely, Rich said. Scientists would not launch them if they thought people or infrastructure would be in danger. What's more likely is that more Beaufort Sea activity could limit research opportunities, Rich said.

"The downrange area that we have, it can be kind of like threading a needle with all the various things that we need to avoid," Rich said. "So every time that you have to add something else in that can be avoided, that can result in fewer launch opportunities for us."

Rich is optimistic that NASA and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management will reach an agreement. The research is important because the aurora is like a visual manifestation of the sun's energy entering the earth's upper atmosphere. That [energy](#) can affect cellphone communications or the electrical grid

Bureau spokesman John Callahan said by email the agency will work with NASA to explore the best options.

"We're happy they've reached out to us to talk about safe operations in the Beaufort," Callahan said. "It's a great example of good lines of communication between federal agencies here."

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