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Federal court halts Shell drilling plans in Arctic

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A federal appeals court has blocked Shell's aggressive oil exploration plans for the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, ordering all activity stopped until a hearing on Aug. 14.

The order from the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals came on petitions from the North Slope Borough and Native and environmental groups.

The groups say federal officials should have allowed a more thorough public evaluation of the potential impact on the environment and the North Slope's indigenous people before allowing any drilling. They contend that Shell's activities could harm Native subsistence food gathering.

Shell has scheduled drilling as well as seismic tests of the undersea geology this summer. It has mobilized the Kulluk drilling platform and the Frontier Discoverer drilling vessel for the drilling at the Sivulliq prospect in Camden Bay, near the coast of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

In all, Shell plans to use 16 vessels this summer. Besides drilling and the seismic tests, the oil giant plans geotechnical boring to test seafloor soil conditions.

The U.S. Mineral Management Service's environmental assessment determined the proposed exploration "would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment."

Besides the North Slope Borough, the groups appealing include Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands, a network of indigenous organizations; the Center for Biological Diversity; and the Alaska Wilderness League.

The appeals court, in its order Thursday, said, "Vessels currently located in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas shall cease all operations performed in furtherance of that program but need not depart the area."

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