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Frozen in Debate

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Frozen in Debate

Oil drilling in the Arctic may be economically beneficial but environmentally harmful



by Annie Carew

At the end of September, Shell ceased offshore oil drilling in the Arctic, after nearly three years and seven billion dollars of effort. The company has stated that oil reserves in the area were not worth the monetary investment. Environmentalists are celebrating the news, while economists are worried about how Alaska will fare when the corporation withdraws.

In 2010, the BP offshore oil rig Deepwater Horizon spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. In 2015, three Exxon rigs off the coast of California experienced a similar accident that leaked over 100,000 gallons of oil into the ocean. The threat of spills from offshore Alaska residents off their coast environment, it is financially up. Microscopic ocean for years, eventually fish instability of the Arctic Ocean, which is covered in ice for most of the year, further discouraged the presence of oil rigs. Offshore oil rigs are expensive and difficult to maintain when access is easy year-round; in a region like the Arctic, where the entire ocean is covered with a layer of ice in the winter, such maintenance would be impossible, and the likelihood of an accident would increase.

“Oil spills are detrimental to the environment, and their effects last long after it is financially feasible to continue cleaning up.”

Oil spills are detrimental to the and their effects last long after feasible to continue cleaning oil droplets can linger in the affecting microorganisms and and marine mammals. The

A study published by the Brookings Energy Security Initiative suggests that Alaska’s current government and infrastructure are not equipped to handle an oil spill. This may be part of the reasons for Shell’s withdrawal; if a spill were to occur, there is not adequate support for a proper cleanup. However, the study asserts that if these systems were strengthened, then drilling in the Arctic might become safer. No suggestions were made for how this could be accomplished.

Economists are concerned about the impact that Shell’s withdrawal will have on Alaska’s struggling economy, which is largely oil dependent. Shell has several thousand contract employees in Alaska, and these people will be out of a job now that Shell’s activity in Alaska has ceased. Shell’s presence in the Arctic was experimental; there was only one operating drill in the Arctic. If the operation had been deemed successful, Shell could have bolstered Alaska’s economy by providing jobs.

The cessation of offshore oil drilling in the Arctic is a mixed bag. While the local economy will most likely suffer, the environmental benefits are undeniable. Should Shell have continued offshore drilling despite the risk to the fragile ecosystem? As with most environmental issues, the answer is neither simple nor easy. 🐾

