

USCG boss warns that US is not ready to clean up Arctic oil spill



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The US is not ready to deal with an oil spill in the Arctic, US Coast Guard head Admiral Paul Zukunft said last week, reports ClimateWire in an article reprinted by Scientific American.

Zukunft said that the challenges of cleaning up the Deepwater Horizon/Macondo oil spill in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico illustrated the extreme difficulty of a clean-up in even a relatively unchallenging environment. "We saw during Deepwater Horizon, whenever the seas were over four feet, our ability to mechanically remove oil was virtually impossible," he said at a Washington symposium hosted by the US Arctic Research Commission. "Four-foot seas up there [in the Arctic] would probably be a pretty darned good day, so certainly environmental conditions weigh heavily in addition to just the remoteness."



In April the current administration signed an executive order that reversed the Obama administration's ban on oil and gas development in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. The latest EO is being legally challenged by environmental groups. Russia, China and other countries have already constructed deepwater ports and are preparing for more exploration. The US does not yet have adequate capability of icebreakers that can access areas that are still hard to access.

The challenges faced if an oil spill occurred in the Arctic would be numerous. There are no viable methods of cleaning up oil from ice and, in addition to weather conditions, much of the area where drilling would take place would be incredibly remote, according to Rear Admiral Jonathan White, former chief oceanographer of the US Navy and head of its climate change task force.

"The East Coast, West Coast, anywhere in the world except the Arctic, you can get booms, you can get platforms, you can get people and material there. In the Arctic, it's almost like trying to get it to the moon in some cases, especially if it's during a season when it's inaccessible; that really doubles, triples the difficulty of responding."

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