# Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 20, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20502

Dear President Obama:

As members of the House of Representatives concerned about the tragedy of the *Deepwater Horizon* accident unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico, we write to urge you to delay planned exploratory drilling in the Arctic Ocean this summer until the causes of this disaster are known and the Administration has subsequently put into place improved and rigorous prevention technology requirements.

We were happy to hear that White House Senior Advisor David Axelrod has said that, "No domestic drilling in new areas is going to go forward until there is an adequate review of what's happened here and of what is being proposed elsewhere." This pause on offshore drilling must include Shell Oil's plan to drill five exploratory wells in the Chukchi Sea and in the Beaufort Sea off of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, currently slated to begin as early as July 1.

The *Deepwater Horizon* catastrophe, caused by a blowout of an exploratory well, continues to highlight the dangers inherent in offshore drilling. While the cause of the explosion remains unknown, at least 200,000 gallons of oil continue to spill into the ocean daily. An oil spill of this magnitude in Alaska could leave oil in the waters off Alaska for decades, killing endangered whales, seals, fish, and birds, and destroying feeding grounds. Such an event could also devastate Alaska Native communities who live in the Arctic and whose cultural survival relies heavily on fish and wildlife from the Arctic Ocean.

Exploratory drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas in the Arctic region pose additional risks. Hazards present in the Arctic can include frigid temperatures, presence of sea ice, gale-force winds, intense storms, and heavy fog. The State of Alaska has said that the risks of large spills are greater during exploratory drilling than during any other time in the drilling process. Furthermore, Coast Guard Commandant Thad W. Allen testified that the Coast Guard has "limited response resources and capabilities" in the event of a major oil spill in the Arctic Ocean, and MMS has stated that they do not have the ability to clean a spill up in sea ice.

On top of the risk, we lack a basic scientific understanding of the Arctic Ocean, which was acknowledged with the announcement of the USGS's gap analysis of science and spill response for the Arctic in March. We find it concerning that this study won't be complete until October 1, months after drilling is set to begin. New exploration drilling in the Arctic should be delayed until the results of the Administration's investigations into the Gulf accident and the USGS gap analysis of science and spill response are understood and can be applied to future decisions in the Arctic.

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In analyzing the proposed Arctic Ocean exploratory drilling prior to the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, MMS asserted that "Historical and modeling data demonstrates that the probability of a large spill occurring during exploration is insignificant and, therefore, this [Environmental Analysis] does not analyze the impacts of large spills from exploration operations." Shell's drilling plans for the Arctic assumed that if a blowout were to occur, the drill rig would be unharmed and the same rig could drill a relief well, if necessary. For safety, economic and environmental reasons, this plan should be revised to incorporate the lessons learned in the Gulf, including new requirements for emergency shut off and blowout prevention equipment, technologies that exist today.

As we have outlined, at this time there are too many unknowns to proceed with this summer's Arctic drilling plan. We hope that we can work with you to address these concerns in the future. Thank you for your attention to these important matters.

Sincerely,

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Member of Congress

MAURICE HINCHEY
Member of Congress

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