

Kulluk Grounding Report Released

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The U.S. Coast Guard yesterday released its report on Royal Dutch Shell's arctic drilling efforts in 2012, which led to the grounding of the mobile drilling rig Kulluk on New Year's Eve.

The 152-page report was released 10-months after a hearing in Anchorage in the aftermath of the grounding. The investigation was done by Commander Joshua McTaggart of the Coast Guard's national investigations center.

The report states that in an effort to avoid state property taxes, Shell did indeed set sail from Dutch Harbor in late December so to be out of Alaska waters on January 1st, when the taxes would have been levied. The report also criticizes Shell for "numerous deficiencies" in planning the voyage, having an inadequate towing plan, and the "questionable decision" to sail from Dutch Harbor to Seattle in December in the face of worsening weather.

The critical report did not erode arctic drilling support among Alaska's U.S. senators Mark Begich and Lisa Murkowski.

In a written statement Begich said he remains a "strong supporter" of reasonable arctic resource development. He said the Coast Guard report and recommendations gives him greater confidence about resource extraction in the arctic.

Murkowski agreed that the recommendations from the Coast Guard will improve the safety of maritime activities during energy resource development in the arctic.

Environmental watchdogs were not as upbeat. Michael Levine is the Pacific senior counsel for Oceana in Juneau.

"This Coast Guard report is thorough, and it points to substantial and important problems, not only with the way Shell operated, but with the manner in which the government allowed them to do so."

He said more oversight of corporations and the government is needed:

"We need two fundamental things. First, government stewardship, and second, corporate accountability. Good corporate governance should lead to good decisions about whether to undertake risky activities like these that Shell proposes. And good government stewardship should lead to decisions that are in the interest of Alaskans and all Americans about whether and under what conditions to allow them."

The mobile drill rig Kulluk, a nearly spherical vessel close to 300-feet across, broke free from its tow line in high seas and went aground on Sitkalidak Island on December 31st, 2012. There were no injuries during the incident and little environmental impact. Damage to the Kulluk, while extensive did not prevent its tow back to Unalaska during calmer weather after it had been recovered and inspected.