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### CLOSING U.S. ARCTIC OCEAN SCIENCE GAPS

*Independent Review Lists Recommendations to Guide Conservation, Drilling Decisions*

WASHINGTON (Sept. 26, 2011)—The Pew Environment Group and Ocean Conservancy released a [white paper](#) today recommending concrete steps the Obama administration should take to address science gaps and inform conservation and development decisions in America's Arctic Ocean. The white paper is the work of 14 scientists, all experts in Arctic marine ecosystems.

"When it comes to the fragile Arctic, science, not politics, needs to guide decision making," said Marilyn Heiman, director of Pew's [U.S. Arctic Program](#). "If we are to avoid irreparable harm to an ecosystem found nowhere else in U.S. waters, we need to develop a comprehensive research and monitoring plan and set aside significant areas for protection."

The recommendations come as the Obama administration weighs oil industry requests to expand into Arctic waters. Today is the last day for public comment on the supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for Chukchi Sea Oil and Gas Lease Sale 193. Federal approval could open this little-explored area of ocean off Alaska's northwest coast to [drilling](#).

In August, federal regulators granted tentative approval for up to four exploratory wells in the Beaufort Sea over the next two years. In addition to reviewing pending requests, the Department of the Interior is preparing a new five-year offshore oil and gas leasing plan.

"The 2012-2017 plan provides an opportunity to take a more balanced and deliberate approach to energy development," said Stan Senner, director of conservation science for [Ocean Conservancy](#). "Instead of forging ahead with ad hoc industrial development, we need to first gather and synthesize the necessary science and then actually use that science to develop a comprehensive plan to protect the Arctic."

Pew and Ocean Conservancy commissioned a review of a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) [report](#) released in June. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar had asked the USGS to identify science needs in the remote Chukchi and adjacent Beaufort seas to inform management choices.

The scientists' study is divided into two main parts. The first, which assesses the adequacy of the USGS report, deems it to have identified major gaps in scientific knowledge in an unbiased manner. The second part emphasizes the need to connect the bodies of research that have been completed in various disciplines to provide a better understanding of the ecosystem as a whole. It also calls for setting priorities for addressing missing information, a critical step given today's budget constraints.

"While the USGS report has documented the tremendous scientific effort made in the Arctic, clearly there's still a long way to go to understand the full impacts of offshore development," said Robert Spies, the former chief science adviser on the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Restoration Program, who oversaw

preparation of the white paper. “Strong leadership is needed now to set priorities and improve science integration.”

Recommended next steps include:

- Making research data more accessible to the larger scientific community, policy makers and the public. The scientists called the lack of access to data, some of it collected by oil industry scientists, “the single most important and urgent issue emerging from the USGS report.”
- Establishing long-term monitoring programs, including a series of stations at which physical, chemical and biological data are continually collected. “Almost every marine scientist now appreciates the absolute necessity of long-term monitoring for understanding ecosystem change,” the white paper said.
- Identifying areas for protection: The Chukchi and Beaufort seas are home to bowhead whales, walrus, polar bears and other marine mammals found nowhere else in the nation, as well as to millions of migratory birds. The white paper notes that enough information is available to set aside certain critical habitat areas.
- Incorporating local and traditional knowledge. Alaska Native groups can provide insight into environmental trends and relationships that might not be available from other sources.

“The USGS has provided a valuable service, and now the Department of the Interior needs to act on the recommendations made in the report it commissioned,” said Pew Arctic science director Henry Huntington. “Following this path will greatly improve the nation’s ability to make sound, science-based decisions about offshore oil and gas activity.”

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*The Pew Environment Group is the conservation arm of The Pew Charitable Trusts, a nongovernmental organization that works globally to establish pragmatic, science-based policies that protect our oceans, preserve our wildlands and promote clean energy. [www.PewEnvironment.org](http://www.PewEnvironment.org)*