



For Immediate Release:
April 17, 2009

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Court Decision to Halt Offshore Drilling Program is First Step Towards Protecting Bristol Bay

The rich waters of Bristol Bay were dealt a temporary victory today when a federal appeals court ruled to cancel the flawed 2007-2012 Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing program prepared under the Bush administration. That plan included a lease sale for 2011 in 5.6 million acres of fish-rich waters in Bristol Bay.

The Minerals Management Service (MMS), the federal agency in charge of offshore leasing decisions, was in the process of preparing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the 2011 Bristol Bay lease sale. The court ruling stops that process and effectively cancels the sale. The court determined MMS did not properly analyze the environmental sensitivity of Bristol Bay and the Arctic when making decisions on where to allow offshore oil and gas leasing. The new Secretary of Interior, Ken Salazar, now has complete authority to determine the fate of Bristol Bay and the more than \$2 billion dollar per year renewable fisheries economy it supports.

“This is a chance for the Obama administration to put protections that had long-existed for Bristol Bay’s waters back into place. Drilling in our nation’s most important fishing grounds does fit into a sound, science-based energy policy for the nation that Salazar is currently working on,” added Harrell.

The court decision offers Secretary Salazar a broader opportunity to revisit Bush-era offshore drilling plans. Salazar has already initiated the process of developing an offshore leasing plan that involves stakeholder input, incorporates renewable energy resources and is science-based. He visited the Bristol Bay community of Dillingham as well as Anchorage earlier this week as part of a series of public hearings on offshore energy development. In Dillingham, he heard overwhelmingly from fishermen and area residents that oppose drilling in the offshore waters that support salmon fisheries vital to their community.

“This is only a first step towards protecting Bristol Bay’s waters from offshore drilling. We have learned from the past cycle of leasing, buybacks and lost protection that a permanent solution is ultimately needed that places the region’s water off limits for good. We hope Congress will capitalize on the removal of the immediate threat of leasing and get to work on that solution,” said AMCC’s Kelly Harrell.