

House of Commons press release

Environmental Audit Committee

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HALT OIL DRILLING IN THE ARCTIC UNTIL STRONGER SAFEGUARDS IN PLACE – MPS REPORT

A cross-party committee of MPs has called for a moratorium on oil and gas drilling in the Arctic until stronger safeguards are put in place.

Chair of the Committee, Joan Walley MP, said:

"The oil companies should come clean and admit that dealing with an oil spill in the icy extremes of the Arctic would be exceptionally difficult."

"The infrastructure to mount a big clean-up operation is simply not in place and conventional oil spill response techniques have not been proven to work in such severe conditions."

In a report on *Protecting the Arctic*, published today, the Environmental Audit Committee calls for a halt on drilling until:

- A pan-Arctic oil spill response standard is in place
- A stricter financial liability regime for oil and gas operations is introduced that requires companies to prove that they can meet the costs of cleaning up.
- An oil and gas industry group is set up to peer-review companies' spill response plans and operating practices, reporting publicly.
- Further independent research and testing on oil spill response techniques in Arctic conditions is conducted, including an assessment of their environmental side-effects.
- An internationally recognised environmental sanctuary is established in at least part of the Arctic.

Joan Walley MP, added:

"Drilling is only currently feasible in the Arctic during a short summer window when it is relatively ice-free."

"We heard compelling evidence that if a blow-out occurred just before the dark Arctic winter returned it may not be possible to cap it until the"

following summer - potentially leaving oil spewing out under the ice for six months or more with devastating consequences for wildlife"

The report also looks at the effect that climate change is having on the Arctic. It warns that a collapse in summer Arctic sea-ice, increased methane emissions from thawing permafrost, melting of the Greenland ice-sheet and changes to the thermo-haline circulation could all have disastrous consequences for the world – pushing up sea levels and transforming weather patterns.

Temperature rises in the Arctic are already affecting the UK's weather, according to evidence submitted to the inquiry. The UK is warming more slowly when compared with the rest of continental Europe, as the decrease in the thermo-haline circulation means that less heat is being brought to Britain by the Gulf Stream.

Chair of the Committee, Joan Walley MP, added:

"The shocking speed at which the Arctic sea ice is melting should be a wake-up call to the world that we need to phase out fossil fuels fast."

"Instead we are witnessing a reckless gold rush in this pristine wilderness as big companies and governments make a grab for the world's last untapped oil and gas reserves."

The report points out that there are already more proven fossil fuel reserves in the world, than can be burnt safely if we want to keep global temperature rises below dangerous thresholds. The MPs accuse the Government of failing to demonstrate how future oil and gas extraction from the Arctic can be reconciled to commitments to limit the overall temperature increase to 2°C. And they call on it to rethink its approach to combating climate change by tackling the supply of fossil fuels, as well as demand.

Caroline Lucas MP, a member of the Committee, said:

"This hard hitting, cross party report comes at a time when the race to carve up the Arctic is accelerating faster than our regulatory or technical capacity to manage it."

The Arctic oil rush is bringing unprecedented risks to the area, and it's now clear that the consequences of any potential oil spill would be catastrophic."

The UK government now has a responsibility to respond to this EAC report and show vital leadership on the issue by doing all it can to urgently secure a moratorium on Arctic drilling – starting with companies registered in this country."

Joan Walley MP, concluded:

"Concerns over climate change should be recognised internationally as a limiting factor on any new oil and gas drilling in the Arctic."

ARCTIC FACTS AND FIGURES:

- The Arctic has been shown to be warming twice as fast as anywhere else on the planet, with average warming of 1-2 degrees since the 1960s.
- Since the 1950s the summer extent of ice has been retreating year on year, at a rate of 4% per decade. Since the early 2000s this rate has increased to 10-12%.
- The six lowest ice extents have all occurred in the last six year and in September this year the ice reached its lowest extent since satellite records began.
- According to the Met Office the earliest date at which the Arctic would be ice-free during the summer would be between 2025 and 2030.
- The US Geological Survey has estimated that the Arctic has 30% of the world's undiscovered gas and 13% of the world's undiscovered oil.
- Lloyds of London and Chatham House have estimated that investment in the Arctic could potentially reach \$100 billion or more over the next ten years.
- The Norwegian Government estimated that some \$250 billion of minerals could be found in its Arctic territory.