



Arctic Environmental Ministers Meeting (June 2010)

By Jim Stotts, ICC Chair

Offshore Oil and Gas Development (We Need a Time Out)

We need to take a time out. The inability of industry and government to handle the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has captured the attention of the world, forcing Arctic states and Arctic peoples to rethink their positions regarding resource development in the Arctic Ocean. The BP blowout in the Gulf provides a harsh lesson that the Arctic must learn from. Clearly, there must be a better way.

For over thirty years, ICC has urged industry and government to ensure proper safety measures are in place, that industrial standards are set to guide activity, that oil spill technology and capability are real, that living resources in the ocean are cared for, and Inuit and their environment are not harmed. We have suggested that development be conducted on land before stepping out to the ocean. On and on, is anybody listening?

In the Gulf, oil continues to gush from the bottom of the ocean, over 50 days and still counting. The Arctic marine ecosystem would never recover from an environmental catastrophe like the one occurring in the Gulf. Sacrificing the pristine Arctic environment for the sake of resource development is unacceptable to Inuit, and should be unacceptable to everyone. We need a time out and we need it now.

This meeting of the Arctic Environmental Ministers is absolutely necessary and timely. Ministers should employ a sense of urgency in discussing the environment of the Arctic Ocean. Inuit know that oil spills in ice-covered waters are much harder to control than oil spills in open water, and no amount of technical double-speak from industry will convince us otherwise. You better start listening to us before it's too late.

There's no need to rush senselessly forward like lemmings over a cliff. Arctic states need to slow down, do the research, address infrastructure needs, conduct proper environment and social impact assessments, and stop believing everything industry tells you. For Inuit, the oil and gas industry has very little credibility left. It should be obvious to everyone that the oil and gas industry has little expertise drilling in ice-covered waters. Offshore resource development must be sustainable and that includes the notion of cultural sustainability.

Without global climate change there would be no development in the Arctic Ocean. Before the advent of climate change it was not possible to seriously consider moving into the Arctic offshore to pursue resources, marine shipping or commercial fishing. Harsh weather and thick ice prohibited these activities. Global warming changed all of that with the warmer temperatures resulting in a thinning icepack. Despite this, conditions for offshore resource development in Arctic waters are still the most unforgiving on the planet.

In the Gulf, oil continues to gush from the bottom of the ocean, over 40 million gallons and still counting. It gives me nightmares imagining a dead polar bear washing up on the beach in front of my home town, soaked in crude oil. Imagine, waiting for seven months for the icepack to move before being able to start drilling a relief well to stop a blowout on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. Scare tactics - perhaps. However, we need to have a real discussion and make real decisions on our common future at this Ministers meeting. We need a time out.

Recently, prominent Inuit organizations have called for moratoriums on offshore oil and gas development pending review and assessment of what went wrong in the Gulf. ICC believes this is prudent and the correct approach to take. It happened once, it can happen again. The United States government is taking a similar stance.

ICC believes all Arctic nations should halt their current offshore oil and gas programs pending further investigation into the Gulf oil spill. Common sense suggests we do nothing less. There is too much at stake to pretend that we have this matter under control.

In the Gulf, oil continues to gush from the bottom of the ocean and it will take two months before a relief well can be drilled to stop the flow. Incredibly, industry and some governments are proceeding as if nothing has happened. They say they are in control of the situation, that the conditions are different, that it would never happen to them. On and on, does anybody believe them?

We need a time out to consider the best way to proceed. Arctic states must take the lead and be responsible for controlling this process. Leaving it to industry to determine how to proceed should not be an option. We have seen what happens when we put blind trust in industry to provide for the better public good.

This meeting of Environmental Ministers can be a good start. We believe the Arctic states have the political will to work together collectively for the benefit of the region. We suggest the Arctic states should provide a greater level of financial and political support to the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council has a crucial role to play. So, let's get to it, there's a lot of work to do. Let's do it right this time.