

Greens Fear Arctic Disaster

By [Roland Oliphant](#)

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Burning oil near the site of the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico would be even more of a disaster in the Arctic. **Derick E. Hingle**

Russian environmentalists will appeal to BP and Rosneft shareholders to thwart the companies' plans to drill for oil in a remote part of the Arctic, amid concerns that a spill in the icebound sea could be unreachable for up to nine months.

"We will work with shareholders and the general public to make sure everyone understands how risky this is," said Sergei Knizhnikov, coordinator on environmental policy in the oil and gas sector at WWF Russia.

On Friday, BP and Rosneft announced plans to explore and develop a 125,000 square kilometer area of the Kara Sea on Russia's continental shelf.

The three blocks the two companies will explore — EPNZ-1, 2 and 3 — are only navigable 100 days a year because of ice, and environmentalists fear that a spill at the end of the drilling period would be impossible to tackle until the spring thaw.

“There is no technology today that can clean up oil in ice conditions,” Knizhnikov said.

“If there's a spill, we'll be able to see black ice from space,” warned Ivan Blokov, campaign director at Greenpeace Russia.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin tried on Friday to make a virtue of BP's association with the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster last summer by saying the company had gained “valuable experience” cleaning up oil spills.

But the greens say there are still unanswered questions about BP's response to the Gulf spill, and point out that just last month Greenland refused BP a permit to drill in its Arctic waters. Rosneft's record is not untarnished either — it had 7,526 oil spills in 2009, Blokov said.

The remote Kara Sea is a refuge for polar bears, walruses and several commercial fish species.

Igor Sechin, Rosneft's chairman and a deputy prime minister, said Friday that development would “comply with the highest standards of environmental protection” and that the two companies would set up a research center to develop new technology in St. Petersburg.

A spokesman for BP told The Moscow Times on Monday that the company “is interested in developing the Arctic in an environmentally responsible manner and we believe that we can carry out this exploration program safely and responsibly.”

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