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Critics say state attempts to expand drilling waste that can be released in Cook Inlet

May 26, 2019--Offshore oil platforms in Cook Inlet, photographed on November 1, 2012. (Loren Holmes / ADN archives)

Cook Inlet watchdog groups and fishermen are coming out against a new state plan they say will allow oil companies to boost the amount of drilling and production waste they release into the Inlet, but a state official described the proposed increase as “minor.”

The plan will also allow the agency to operate more efficiently during a time of limited funding, said Gerry Brown, a manager within the Department of Environmental Conservation’s Oil and Gas Section.

The agency in February issued a draft general permit covering several oil and gas facilities operating in Cook Inlet. The proposed permit would govern the disposal of byproducts from oil and gas activity that can contain toxic chemicals, such as water that’s separated from oil but still holds some hydrocarbons or other pollutants.

The industry in Cook Inlet operates under a unique exemption to the Clean Water Act that allows oil and gas companies to release those materials into the Inlet, known for its strong tides. In other provinces, oil companies are required to inject that wastewater back underground.

The state should support that “zero discharge” requirement in effect in other states, said Susan Saupe, director of science and research for Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council.

“As written, we believe the draft general permit allows for new discharges, including in areas not permitted under prior discharge permits,” Saupe said.

The group opposes those new discharges, she said.

Bob Shavelson, with Cook Inletkeeper, said the state already allows the industry to dump vast amounts of the waste streams into the Inlet. The proposed permit would increase current levels of discharge by about 50%, he said.

Brown said that estimate is incorrect. He said the draft permit will allow the industry to release 9% more produced water into the Inlet beyond current levels, or up to 1 million gallons of the additional wastewater daily. He called it a “minor” increase.

The increase comes because an offshore production platform, the Osprey operated by Glacier Oil and Gas, wants to begin discharging produced water into the Inlet, he said. The company may not always reach the limit, he said.

The industry collectively is permitted to release about 10 million gallons of the wastewater daily. But it releases about half that amount, based on a rough estimate, he said.

Brown said the state does not expect to see an increase in the release of drill cuttings -- ground-up rocks coming to the surface -- or drilling muds used to help bring up those rocks under the proposed permit.

The produced water is the largest amount of the drilling and production waste released by the industry, he said.

Ian Pitzman, a commercial fisherman from Homer, said the state needs to take steps that will lead to cleaner, not dirtier, waters in the Inlet.

“I recognize we have an industry and communities and that there’s going to be an impact, but I think we should work toward minimizing the impact,” he said. “We should be working toward zero discharge. This is a step in the wrong direction for me.”

The Alaska Oil and Gas Association, whose members include Glacier Oil and Gas and Hilcorp, the most active oil and gas producer in the Inlet, could not be reached for comment Friday.

Tom Evans, a subsistence fisherman from the coastal village of Nanwalek, said he worries about pollution in fish and seals he and others eat.

“I don’t want to bankrupt the industry,” he said. “I need fuel for my car and outboard and all that. But they need to get closer to zero discharge.”

About this Author

[Alex DeMarban](#)

Alex DeMarban is a longtime Alaska journalist who covers the oil and gas industries and general assignments. Reach him at 907-257-4317 or alex@adn.com.