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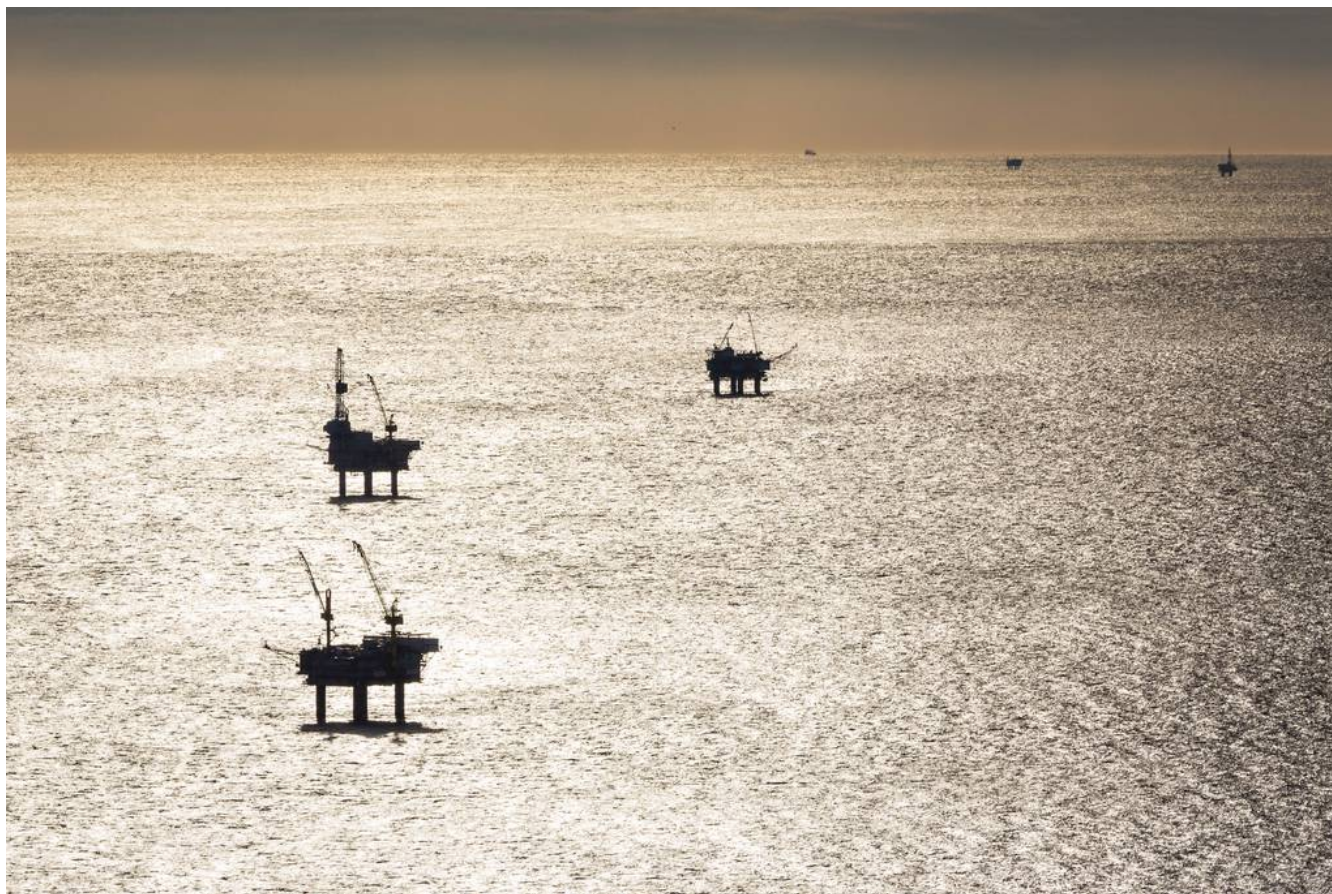
Energy

Alaska oil and gas commission cancels monthly public meetings

By Alex DeMarban

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Offshore oil platforms in Cook Inlet, photographed on November 1, 2012. (Loren Holmes / Alaska Dispatch News)

The state commission that oversees oil field activities in Alaska is ending its long-running practice of holding monthly public meetings, drawing concerns about transparency.

The Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission approved the policy during a five-minute meeting on June 1, when it canceled the remaining monthly meetings this year.

The meetings were a chance for for commissioners to discuss regulatory, legislative and investigative matters. They included time for public comment and a report from the agency on recent activity.

Commissioners said the monthly meetings had little to no public attendance and were frequently canceled because the commission had no items on the agenda for discussion.

The quasi-judicial agency, consisting of three commissioners and staff, will still hold meetings and hearings upon request, commissioners said.

Veri di Suvero, executive director of Alaska Public Interest Research Group, said the decision will reduce public access to an organization that plays a critical role in protecting Alaska's economic and environmental interests.

Di Suvero attended the June 1 meeting by phone, in hopes of hearing an update on the commission's investigation into the [ConocoPhillips gas leak](#) at the Alpine field on the North Slope this spring, di Suvero said. That didn't come up, di Suvero said.

"The AOGCC has an incredibly vital role to play with making sure our state is economically viable, and our land is not being poisoned," di Suvero said. "They are actively avoiding the public by canceling these meetings and by not being transparent about what they are working on."

The agency will continue to hold an annual public meeting on its budget in the fall, according to Commissioner Dan Seamount, who did not attend the meeting. It also currently [plans](#) two public hearings this year, though the two-hour meetings will deal with specific issues. One set for June 30 involves a request by Hilcorp Alaska to allow it to sell propane at Prudhoe Bay, while another on Aug. 4 deals with amendments to commission regulations.

Di Suvero said the hearings, limited to specific issues, won't address the broader issues the public might want to engage in at a regular meeting.

On June 2, di Suvero sent a [letter](#) to the commission seeking answers about why the meetings were canceled and how the commission will determine when future meetings should be held.

In a short email [reply](#) on June 9, Chair Jeremy Price, appointed to the commission's public seat by Gov. Mike Dunleavy in 2019, said the meetings are routinely canceled because the commission has no agenda items to bring before the public.

Price and Commissioner Jessie Chmielowski voted to approve of the cancellation.

“If an issue comes before the commission that is better suited for a public meeting, the commission will issue a public notice and schedule the meeting,” Price said in the email.

Seamount echoed that intention in an interview.

“If someone from the public has a big issue to bring up, they can always request a public meeting,” he said. “We report to the people and state of Alaska.”

Hollis French, who served three years until 2019 and was appointed to the public seat by former Gov. Bill Walker, said the monthly public meetings were not well-attended during his time.

But he said the commission should do more to engage the public and boost attendance, such as holding informational hearings on important issues like an oil field leak or fracking.

“This is just another step back away from the public instead of reaching out to the broader Alaska populace,” he said.

Price said in his email that the monthly meetings are fairly recent in AOGCC history. The agency was created in 1955.

John Norman, who held the public seat for a decade until 2014 and was appointed by former Gov. Frank Murkowski, said the meetings were held during his time with the agency. He said he doesn’t want to second-guess the commission’s decision, which he said could be based on valid reasons. But he said he leans in favor of continuing them.

“I thought it was beneficial for a public agency once a month to afford the public an opportunity, if they have any questions or concerns, to raise those, and for the agency to report on what it had done that month,” he said.

Kara Moriarty, head of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, which advocates for the industry, said she's not surprised the meetings were canceled. For many years, she was often the only one who would attend, and they lasted only 15 to 20 minutes, she said.

The monthly reports from commission staff, such as permits to drill that had been issued, provided information that is now online, she said. People can still petition the agency for investigations, she said.

"I don't see it as something that decreases their level of oversight," she said.

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