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IUCN is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. IUCN is a multi-cultural, multilingual organization with 1000 staff located in 42 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

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NEWS RELEASE

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IUCN Convenes an Independent Scientific Panel to Look into Sakhalin II Project's Impact on the Western Gray Whale

Gland, Switzerland, 26 August 2004 (IUCN) – In response to widespread concerns over environmental impacts of proposed oil and gas developments off the coast of Sakhalin Island in the Russian Far East, IUCN – The World Conservation Union is convening an Independent Scientific Review Panel, which will evaluate the impacts of these developments on the critically endangered Western Gray Whale population and related key elements of biodiversity.

The Sakhalin II Phase 2 project, developed by Sakhalin Energy Investment Company (SEIC), has come under public scrutiny over its potential threat to the survival of the Western Gray Whale. The only known population of this species in the Northwest Pacific may number no more than 100 individuals. Last month, the International Whaling Commission called for urgent measures to protect this critically endangered whale population.

Mohammad Rafiq, Head of IUCN Business & Biodiversity Programme says: "Conservation organizations and potential project lenders have been asking for an independent scientific review of the project. Sakhalin Energy Investment Company has approached IUCN to carry out this task as a knowledge-based organization. We have accepted this responsibility after consultation with key stakeholders in consideration of our Union's mission and mandate and on the condition of full autonomy to ensure the credible, objective review expected from IUCN."

The Sakhalin II project comprises the development of two offshore platforms linked to the shore by pipelines. These installations would be located in the vicinity of the summer feeding grounds of the Western Gray Whales.

The Independent Scientific Panel, commissioned by SEIC and convened by IUCN, will comprise international experts on Gray Whale ecology and behaviour, oil spill risk analysis, noise and bio-acoustics, and other pertinent issues, identified in close consultation with the conservation community, governments, lending organizations and the companies involved. Dr Randall Reeves, Chair of the Cetacean Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, will chair the Panel.

The Panel is expected to complete the review by the end of November this year. Its report will provide information to the decision-makers of the project, including its potential lenders, and will be made publicly available. Pending this review, Sakhalin Energy has postponed certain development work.

IUCN has built its credibility as an independent convenor and scientific authority over the years, through its standard-setting role and global Commissions such as the IUCN Species Survival Commission, which brings together over 8'000 experts worldwide.

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Notes to journalists and editors:

Unlike their Eastern (American) relatives, **Western Gray Whales** (*Eschrichtius robustus* – Northwest Pacific (Asian) stock) are listed as Critically Endangered on the 2003 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Gray whales are endemic to the North Pacific Ocean, having become extinct in the North Atlantic more than 150 years ago. Their subpopulation in the North-Western Pacific was thought to be extinct as recently as 1972, but is known to survive today as a small remnant subpopulation with less than 50 reproductive individuals.

The species is known for its long-distance migrations between subtropical calving and mating grounds near continental coasts and high-latitude feeding grounds in the Arctic and Subarctic. Key areas of distribution include the summer feeding grounds off northeastern Sakhalin Island, Russia (52°50'N 143°20'E).

The decline in the Northwest Pacific Gray Whale subpopulation can be largely attributed to modern commercial whaling off Russia, Korea, and Japan between the 1890s and 1960s. This subpopulation has been legally protected under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling since 1946, although it continued to be hunted by countries that had not signed the Convention.

Current threats to the Western Gray Whale population include occasional illegal harpooning and entanglement in fishing gear. Activities related to oil and gas exploration, including high-intensity geophysical seismic surveying, drilling operations, increased ship and air traffic, and oil spills, all pose potential threats to gray whales.

Sakhalin Energy Investment Company is a Russia-based company, in which Royal Dutch Shell owns a 55 percent stake and Japanese partners Mitsui and Mitsubishi Corporation hold the remaining 45 percent.

The Sakhalin II project comprises the development of two fields – Piltun-Astokhskoye, primarily an oil field with associated gas, and Lunsokoye, predominantly a gas field with associated condensate. The proposed development involves installation of offshore platforms on the Piltun-Astokhskoye field and the Lunsokoye field and linking both to the shore by offshore pipelines. More information about Sakhalin Energy Investment Company can be found at: www.sakhalinenergy.com