

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska



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The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska

What's at Stake?

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a spectacular wilderness of boreal forests, rugged mountains, sweeping tundra vistas, wild rivers, coastal lagoons, and barrier islands. Located in the northeastern corner of Alaska, the Arctic Refuge features a complete range of arctic and sub-arctic ecosystems and an extraordinary assemblage of wildlife. The Arctic Refuge is a place of unparalleled beauty, so wild and untrammled that one may walk for days without seeing signs of another human being.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has called the Refuge's 1.5 million-acre Coastal Plain "the center for wildlife activity" for the entire Refuge. But the oil industry and its allies are lobbying hard to open this part of the Refuge to oil drilling.

Polar and grizzly bears, wolves, and muskoxen are just a few of the more than 250 animal species that depend on the Coastal Plain. Millions of birds, representing some 125 species, migrate to the Coastal Plain to nest, rear their young, molt, and feed. The Coastal Plain is not only one of the most significant on-shore polar bear denning habitats in the U.S. but also the most important habitat for the Porcupine caribou herd (named for the Porcupine River).

The Gwich'in (Athabaskan) people depend on the Porcupine caribou herd for their subsistence and culture, a relationship that has existed for thousands of years. The 123,000-member caribou herd has used the Coastal Plain as a calving area for millennia, traveling hundreds of miles from wintering grounds in Canada and the U.S. There is no alternative to this sensitive habitat for the herd. The gathering of the herd following calving is a spectacle reminiscent of Africa's Serengeti and of the enormous herds of buffalo that once thundered across the Great Plains. Other tribal groups from across the country—including the Alaska Intertribal Council, representing Alaska Natives from across the state—have consistently supported the Gwich'in position against drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Protection Status

Currently, oil and gas exploration and drilling are prohibited in the Refuge's 1.5 million-acre Coastal Plain, also known as the "1002 Area" after the section of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) which set the Coastal Plain aside for special study. ANILCA prohibits oil exploration and development in the 1002 Area; it would require an act of Congress to change that status. Of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's 19 million acres, approximately 8 million acres are protected as the Mollie Beatty Wilderness Area. However, the area being proposed for drilling is not part of the protected wilderness.

Status of Threat

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been almost continuously in the crosshairs for drilling since 1980. The oil and gas industries and pro-drilling politicians have tried numerous times to pass legislation opening the 1002 Area to oil and gas development. Since 2001, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed bills authorizing Arctic Refuge drilling multiple times but drilling legislation always faced a filibuster in the U.S. Senate. In recent years, moderate Republicans and Democrats in the House formed a bipartisan bloc to foil attempts to attach drilling to unrelated budget bills. In December 2005, an effort to attach the Refuge drilling language to a Defense Appropriations bill was blocked in the U.S. Senate, after attempts to attach drilling to the filibuster-immune budget reconciliation bill were scuttled in response to bipartisan opposition in the House.

In the 110th Congress, drilling proponents introduced more than ten bills that would ostensibly use highly speculative leasing revenues from the Refuge to fund independently worthy renewable energy proposals as well as a number of programs that continue to tie America to finite and dirty commodities such as coal.

At the same time, legislation to designate the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain as federally-protected wilderness has been introduced in every Congress since 2001.

What Would Drilling Mean to the Arctic Refuge?

The oil industry claims it can develop the Arctic Refuge in an “environmentally sensitive” manner and points to its history in Prudhoe Bay. But in March 2006, a leaking pipeline spilled close to 270,000 gallons of crude oil at Prudhoe Bay and, in August 2006, BP was forced to shut down a significant portion of the Prudhoe Bay pipeline complex because years of inadequate maintenance led to dangerous corrosion in miles of pipelines. According to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, an average of more than 400 spills of oil and other toxic substances were reported every year between 1996 and 2004. In fact, more than 1.7 million gallons of toxic substances have been spilled in the last six years alone. Emissions of some air pollutants on the North Slope of Alaska are twice those in Washington, D.C.

Experts agree that developing an oil field in the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain would inevitably involve:

- Hundreds of miles of pipelines and roads leading to oil fields, oil pumping plants, power generating stations, and airstrips, which would disturb and block the free movement of migratory wildlife.
- Helicopters, cargo planes, dump trucks, and bulldozers—the sights and sounds of heavy equipment would be almost constant for long periods.
- Living quarters, sewage treatment, and other infrastructure for hundreds of workers.
- Chronic spills of oil and other toxic substances onto the fragile tundra.
- Rivers and streambeds—key habitat for wildlife—stripped of millions of cubic yards of gravel for road, airstrip, and drill pad construction.
- Enormous diversions of fresh water to support drilling at the expense of pristine rivers and wetlands.

Proponents of drilling have leaned heavily on their assertion that development would be “limited to 2,000 acres” of the 1.5 million-acre Coastal Plain. But in reality, the entire 1.5 million acre 1002 Area would be opened to leasing and exploration. In fact, the 2005 House energy bill (with the so-called “2,000 acre” restriction) would have mandated that the first lease sale be no less than 200,000 acres. In addition, drilling proposals contain no requirement that the 2,000 acres be contiguous. The bill’s “2,000 acres” calculations only included the area where oil production facilities actually touch the ground and excluded gravel mines, roads and pipelines (except their posts).² It did not limit seismic or other exploration operations across the 1.5 million acre area, nor did it take into account air and noise pollution, which are carried far from development. The U.S. Geological Survey has said that whatever oil and gas is under the Coastal Plain is in small deposits spread throughout the plain.³ To produce oil from this vast area, networks of pipelines and roads would be built, fragmenting wildlife habitat.

Of course, even if the 2,000 acres were contiguous, it would have a huge impact on the wilderness. After all, the 12-lane wide New Jersey turnpike stretches more than 100 miles across the state but covers only 1,773 acres.

Development in the Arctic Refuge would destroy the wilderness experience for all visitors. Opportunities for pristine camping, hiking, rafting, and hunting unlike anywhere else in North America would be lost

² Identical amendment in H.R.4 and H.R.6: “Ensure that the maximum amount of surface acreage covered by production and support facilities, including airstrips and any areas covered by gravel, beams or piers for support of pipelines, does not exceed 2,000 acres on the Coastal Plain.”

³ U.S. Geological Survey. April 2001. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 1002 Area, Petroleum Assessment, 1998, including economic analysis*. USGS Fact Sheet FS-028-01.

Bird, K.J. 1998. Chapter AO. Assessment Overview. In: *The oil and gas resource potential of the 1002 area, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska*, by ANWR Assessment Team, U.S. Geological Survey Open File Report 98-34. Figs. AO6-15.

forever if the Coastal Plain were turned into a sprawling oil and gas complex, and the effects on wildlife would threaten the Gwich'in's subsistence way of life.

Where is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?



Current Oil and Gas Development

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the only portion of Alaska's North Slope that is currently protected by law from oil exploration and drilling. Immediately to the west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, drilling has been underway for more than three decades at the Prudhoe Bay oil field complex, which covers more than 1,000 square miles. Further west, the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), another area rich in wildlife and subsistence resources, is also the target of intense oil-company activity. And offshore, in the waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas (Arctic Ocean), millions of acres have been offered for oil-company leasing. Since 2001, more than 70 million acres of the NPR-A and Arctic Ocean have been made available to oil companies for leasing.

Solution

The most biologically rich and recognized wildlife and wilderness values of the region are not permanently protected. A balanced approach to the management of these natural resources is needed to protect the most sensitive areas, resources and cultures.

The Wilderness Society believes that the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should be designated a federally-protected wilderness area. Until the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge has the permanent protection that wilderness designation provides, the battle over oil drilling in this sensitive, unique and irreplaceable place will continue. Concerned citizens should contact their Representatives and ask that they support wilderness designation for the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and oppose any measure, in any legislative vehicle, that would open the Arctic Refuge to oil drilling.

For more information contact: Maribeth Oakes at (202)429-2674 or maribeth_oakes@tws.org or Eleanor Huffines at (907)272-9453 or eleanor_huffines@tws.org