

Oil and gas drilling in alaska wildlife refuge

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Since the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) was established by the federal government in 1960, the refuge has often been considered a symbol of Alaska's natural bounty. Located in the northeast corner of the state above the Arctic Circle, ANWR contains more than 19 million acres of pristine land, including high mountains, untouched coastline and tundra (cold, dry regions that are covered by snow for most of the year). It is also home to thousands of animal species including polar bears, migratory birds and caribou.

ANWR is also believed to contain one of the largest reserves of oil in the U. S., and for years, public officials have been divided over whether private companies should be allowed to tap into that resource. (Easton, 2004) Since ANWR was set aside as a nature preserve, it has been off-limits to oil prospecting.

Yet during the past decade, support for drilling the refuge has gradually mounted. Although efforts to open ANWR long went unheeded, in recent years they have gained favor among many public officials, bringing the future of the refuge into question.

Citing problems such as rising fuel costs and the U. S.'s increasing dependence on foreign sources of fuel, many observers, including President Bush (R), argue that the refuge's oil supplies must be made available to avert future fuel shortages.

" The only way to become less dependent on foreign sources of crude oil is to explore at home," Bush says. " And you bet I want to open up a small part

of Alaska because when that field [ANWR] is online, it will produce one million barrels a day."(Cunningham, 2005)

According to supporters, opening ANWR to development would mark an important step toward expanding the U. S.'s fuel reserves and energy supply. In recent years, citizens and businesses have become increasingly reliant on the Internet and other electronic devices, which require large amounts of power.

Furthermore, gasoline consumption has remained high to due unchecked automobile use and the growing popularity of vans, sport utility vehicles, and other inefficient car models. Consequently, the nation's demand for energy has far out-paced domestic fuel production, resulting in rising fuel prices and energy shortages.

Fossil fuel consumption is expected to increase in the coming decades. Unless the federal government opens ANWR for oil exploration and drilling, supporters argue, fuel shortages will worsen, hampering economic growth and endangering national security.

Advocates also contend that private companies can tap into ANWR's oil with minimal damage to the landscape and wildlife. Technological advances, some analysts argue, have enabled oil companies to drill for oil without causing significant environmental damage. (Cunningham, 2005)

Therefore, supporters contend, the U. S. should not squander the economic benefits that could be reaped by opening ANWR to oil drilling. Furthermore, they assert, keeping ANWR off-limits to natural resource extraction is a

disservice to Alaskan citizens, who would benefit greatly from the economic growth that oil exploration would bring to their state. (Easton, 2004)

Yet opponents, including many environmental activists, vehemently oppose oil drilling in ANWR. Regardless of how much oil is contained in the refuge, they argue, its unique ecosystems should not be put at risk. Many commentators argue that opening the refuge to oil drilling is a destructive and short-sighted solution to the U. S.'s energy needs.

Oil drilling cannot be conducted in an environmentally safe manner, they argue. Rather than squandering natural treasures such as ANWR, opponents say, government officials should instead focus their attention on developing alternative fuel sources and decreasing fossil fuel consumption.

Some observers also assert that oil drilling in ANWR would pose a threat to the livelihood of indigenous people that live in or near the refuge. Tribes such as the Gwich'in, which have inhabited the area for thousands of years, have long hunted caribou for subsistence and ceremonial purposes. (Lee, 2001)

Opening ANWR to oil drilling, opponents argue, would cause environmental damage that would shrink caribou herds, putting the culture and livelihood of many people at risk. Does the U. S. truly need to open ANWR to oil drilling? How would oil drilling affect the people, animals and plants that inhabit ANWR and its environs?

Oil vs. Nature

Throughout history, Alaska has been known not only for its natural beauty but also for its natural resources. President Dwight Eisenhower (D), in-office

1953-61, established ANWR in 1960, shortly after Alaska gained statehood. While setting aside some land for conservation purposes, Eisenhower also opened 20 million acres of the Arctic coastline to oil prospecting and drilling. In 1968, oil was discovered in the Prudhoe Bay oil field, an area to the east of ANWR.

The development of Prudhoe Bay generated thousands of new jobs in Alaska and greatly broadened the state's tax revenue base. (Easton, 2004) The opening of the oil field also led to the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, an 800-mile oil pipeline that runs from Prudhoe Bay to the port of Valdez, a city in southeastern Alaska. The pipeline continues to serve as an important source of oil for the U. S.

As Alaskan oil exploration and drilling increased in earnest during the late 1970s, leaders such as President Jimmy Carter (D), in-office 1977-81, made efforts to preserve wilderness areas by setting aside land for conservation. In 1978, he created numerous national monuments, making more than 50 million acres of Alaskan wilderness off-limits to development.

In 1980, Carter also ratified the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), a bill that established a system of national parks and nature preserves that covers more than 104 million acres. That law also expanded ANWR to 19 million acres and designated the refuge as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, a nationwide network of parks and conservation areas managed by the federal government. (Lovins, 2001)

Although ANILCA set aside most of ANWR as a wilderness area, it deferred a decision on the future of a 1. 5-million-acre area of the refuge's coastal plain.

The area is commonly referred to as the 1002 Area, a name derived from section 1002 of ANILCA, which recognized it as both an enormous source of oil and valuable wildlife habitat. (Cunningham, 2005)

During the early 1980s, the U. S. Interior Department, the federal department responsible for managing public lands owned by the federal government, conducted studies on the potential oil reserves of the 1002 Area. In 1986, information gleaned from those studies was submitted to Congress.

In 1987, after concluding that the area contained a substantial amount of oil, the Interior Department recommended that the area be opened to drilling. Some public officials, including many Republicans, used those recommendations to rally support for opening the area to oil exploration. Supporters argued that oil drilling in the area was essential to broadening the nation's domestic fuel base and fueling economic expansion. (Lee, 2001)

In 1989, members of the Senate Energy Committee began to debate opening ANWR to drilling. During the same year, an Exxon Corp. oil tanker, the Exxon Valdez, ran aground in Alaska's Prince Edward Sound, spilling tons of oil and causing severe environmental damage to the area.

The incident drew vehement protest over the environmental practices of the oil industry, and public support for oil exploration went into decline. As a result, advocates failed to muster support for legislation that would have lifted the prohibition of oil drilling in the refuge.

Yet during the mid-to-late 1990s, after Republicans gained a majority in the House of Representatives, public officials began to reconsider the fate of

ANWR. In 1995, for example, both chambers of Congress passed a budget bill that would have opened ANWR to oil exploration.

However, President Clinton (D), in office from 1993 to 2001, vetoed that bill, and in subsequent years, his administration continued to oppose similar legislation. Before leaving office, Clinton administration officials also considered designating ANWR a national monument, but that action was never taken. (Easton, 2004)

During the 2000 presidential race, the fate of ANWR became a central issue in the campaigns of both major candidates. While Vice President Al Gore (D) vowed to block efforts to open ANWR to oil exploration, Bush announced his fervent support for such measures. Whereas Gore argued that the refuge should be preserved, Bush declared a commitment to increasing oil exploration and drilling in order to expand the nation's fuel supply.

Although Bush has yet to introduce or sign legislation that would lift the ban on drilling in ANWR, he has continued to voice support for such measures. (Cunningham, 2005) In addition, shortly after taking office, he appointed Gale Norton, a strong advocate of ANWR oil exploration, as secretary of the Interior Department. Meanwhile, many Democrats have vowed to vigorously oppose any attempts to open ANWR to drilling, and the future of the refuge remains a divisive issue.