

THE FUTURE OF ALASKA'S WESTERN ARCTIC IS AT RISK

THE ENERGY BILL PUTS WILDLIFE AND WILDLANDS IN THE HANDS OF THE OIL COMPANIES

THE ENERGY BILL THREATENS THE WESTERN ARCTIC

Section 317 of the Energy Bill threatens more than 23 million acres of public lands in the Western Arctic with indiscriminate oil and gas leasing, putting at risk essential wildlife habitat for polar bears, caribou, and millions of migratory birds, valuable wilderness lands, and key subsistence uses. This bill seeks to give free reign to the oil industry in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve) without designating protected areas for wildlife and subsistence users as planned by Congress in 1976.

A CALL FOR BALANCE

Conservationists do not oppose oil leasing in the entire Reserve, but leasing should proceed only after the key wildlife, wilderness, and subsistence resources are identified and protected. The energy bill seeks to allow for development without protections for other public values. This land belongs to all Americans, not just the oil industry.

THE WESTERN ARCTIC AND THE NATIONAL PETROLEUM RESERVE-ALASKA

The Western Arctic is that vast region from the Colville River west to the Chukchi Sea and from the Beaufort Sea coast south to the foothills on the north side of the Brooks Mountain Range. The largest part of the western Arctic is public land and is within the Reserve. The Reserve consists of 23.5 million acres of lakes, wetlands, coastal lagoons, rivers, upland foothills, and mountains. It is America's largest single block of wildlands.

The Reserve was established in 1923 and put under the Navy's control to allocate any oil in the region as an emergency oil supply for defense needs. The area remained mostly undeveloped and in 1976 the land was transferred over to the Department of Interior. The Reserve was then open to exploration, but all oil



Caribou / courtesy of Galen Rowell / Mountain Light Photography

development was prohibited unless authorized by Congress. Recognizing the wildlife, wilderness and subsistence values of the Reserve, Congress set for itself the task of determining what areas would be protected. However, to this day there is no permanent protection from Congress for any critically important wildlife, wilderness, or subsistence use areas.

AMERICA'S TREASURE IN JEOPARDY

Without question, the Western Arctic contains some of the most superlative natural resources in the entire circumpolar Arctic region:

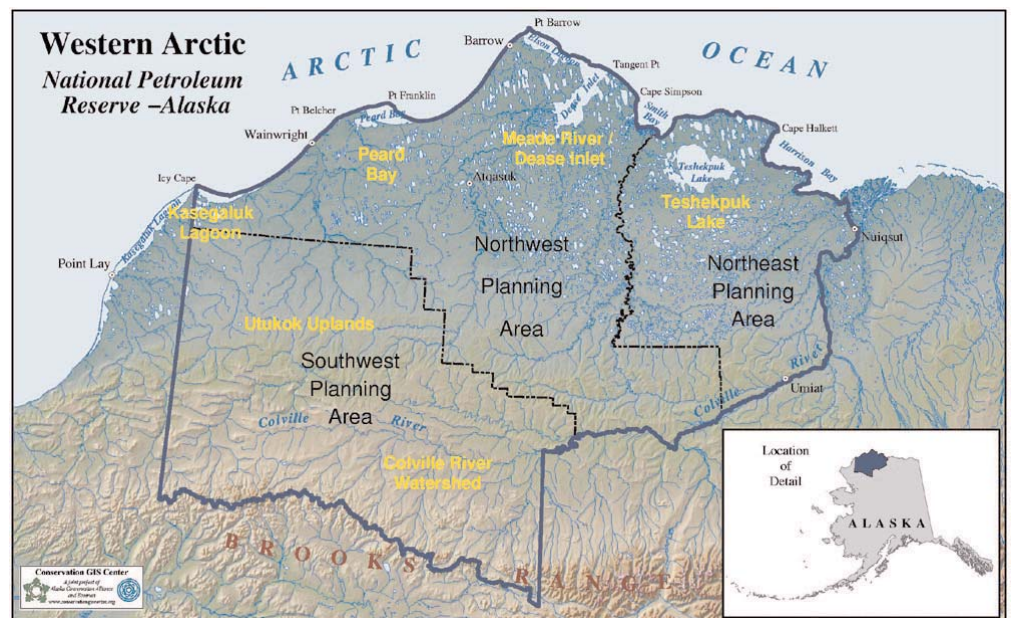
- ♦ Wetlands with high-density waterbird nesting and molting habitat for threatened steller's, spectacled eiders, rare

yellow-billed loons, and more than 20% of the world's population of the prized pacific black brant;

- ♦ Primary calving ground for the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, Alaska's largest, with more than 430,000 animals;
- ♦ Polar bear denning habitat and grizzly bear feeding areas;
- ♦ Marine mammal habitat for beluga and bowhead whales, and spotted seals;
- ♦ Valuable habitat for anadromous fish and nesting peregrine falcons in the interior coastal plain;
- ♦ Subsistence resources for the Inupiat and other Alaskan natives including 40 native villages who depend on the resources of the Western Arctic such as caribou.



Spectacled Eider
courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Western Arctic Map courtesy of the Conservation GIS Center

A SEVERE THREAT TO OUR PUBLIC LANDS

Without regard for internationally significant resources in the Western Arctic, the Bush Administration is aggressively moving to lease every acre in the 23.5-million-acre Reserve. The Administration just made a decision to offer up new leases on 100% of the 8.8-million-acre Northwest Planning Area and is now focusing on opening the Teshekpuk Lake area in the Northeast Planning Area to oil drilling. This area had been closed to oil drilling by Secretary of the Interior James Watt in 1983 and Bruce Babbitt maintained and expanded that closed area in 1998.

Section 317 of the Energy Bill would support this unbalanced leasing program.

- ◆ It seeks to permit the Secretary of Interior to lease and develop oil and gas in 100% of the Reserve and fails to set aside key areas for wildlife habitat, native hunting and fishing, water quality or other non-commercial values.
- ◆ Section 317 gives away public resources to private companies by giving the Secretary of the Interior the authority to waive all fees and royalties.
- ◆ The section also promotes reckless development by attempting to allow the renewal of leases even if they do not meet the original lease requirements.



Grizzly Bear in Western Arctic

A STEALTH ATTACK

Section 317 was added in at the last minute during conference, behind closed doors. Neither the Senate nor the House debated the provision and since it is in the conference report, senators and representatives cannot amend the language. In 1980 Congress passed a rider that authorized the Secretary of Interior to issue oil and gas leases in the Reserve at the time. This was a short sighted and short-term response to the energy crisis of the time and did not address permanent protection of valuable wildlife, wilderness and native hunting and fishing areas. This similar language in Section 317 of the conference bill repeats the same mistakes and continues to avoid the basic task Congress set for itself in 1976 to determine which areas to protect.



Polar Bears / Courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

National Academy of Sciences Found Significant Effects of Oil Development

The National Academy of Sciences National Research Council recently completed a congressionally mandated report-Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope-which documents significant environmental and cultural effects that have accumulated as the result of three decades of oil development on Alaska's North Slope.

- ◆ Oil development in the Arctic is proceeding haphazardly, without a prior assessment of cumulative impacts. The ecological integrity of the North Slope is at serious risk from piecemeal and damaging development.
- ◆ The past 35 years of oil development on Alaska's North Slope have had serious environmental impacts on the wildlife, vegetation, and subsistence activities.
- ◆ There can be no assessment of the impacts of the oil industry on the environment unless areas are set aside and protected as a scientific "control" sites.
- ◆ Habitat for migratory birds has been degraded and displaced caribou from the Central Arctic Herd have suffered a reduction of reproductive output.
- ◆ Current regulations on minimum snow depth and frost requirements for energy industry seismic activities are not supported by scientific evidence and appear to be insufficient for protecting the delicate tundra.



Gas flaring at Prudhoe Bay production site / Courtesy of Pamela A. Miller

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