



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

The Arctic Wildlife National Refuge: Myths vs. Facts

Myth: Oil development would be limited to only 2,000 acres of the Arctic Refuge.

Fact: Opening the Refuge to drilling would result in a spider web of industrial development across the entire 1.5 million acre coastal plain of the Refuge, which is described by scientists as the “biological heart of the Arctic Refuge.” The “2,000-acre footprint” provision was cooked up by oil industry lobbyists to make Arctic Refuge drilling seem more acceptable. For example, to calculate the “footprint” of an oil pipeline, their political math only counts the area where a support touches the ground. By that math, the “footprint” of a kitchen table is only the 4 square inches where the legs touch the ground. Make no mistake: the drilling lobby wants to open the 1.5 million-acre coastal plain of the Refuge so that they can drill across the entire 1.5 million acres.

Myth: Oil exploration and development would only take place in the winter months, so wildlife would not be harmed.

Fact: Once oil is discovered, efforts to recover it continue year-round. Year-long vehicle traffic, production plant noise, helicopter and airplane traffic, air pollution, and other activities create inevitable conflicts with wildlife in every month and season. Even during winter, oil exploration would threaten polar bears over-wintering in their dens, disturb sensitive musk oxen—which are year-round residents—and cause lasting harm to tundra vegetation. Winter exploration also impacts fish habitats in rivers and lakes by removing massive amounts of water to build ice roads and ice pads, and seismic trails damage plants and permafrost even through snow and ice.¹

Myth: Oil development would not harm wildlife.

Fact: Sprawling oil development is simply not compatible with a wildlife refuge. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the only place in the nation where the full spectrum of arctic and sub-arctic ecosystems is protected in an unbroken continuum, and has been nicknamed “America’s Serengeti.” Overwhelming scientific evidence, including studies from the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey,² has predicted that proposed oil drilling in the Refuge would significantly harm wildlife. Study after study has also shown that the Porcupine caribou herd is particularly sensitive and would be greatly impacted by oil development in their Arctic Refuge calving grounds. Decreased caribou densities within a radius of 4 km of pipelines and roads show that the “extent of avoidance [by caribou] greatly exceeds the physical ‘footprint’ of an oil-field complex,”³ according to caribou biologists. Noise, air and water pollution, wildlife disturbance, and other impacts of oil exploration and development would extend well beyond the sites where direct habitat loss occurs.

Myth: Proposed oil drilling would only occur on an insignificant section of the Refuge.

Fact: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers the Coastal Plain, the area proposed for oil drilling, to be the “biological heart” of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Also called the “1002 Area,” this is the center of wildlife activity in the Arctic Refuge and its most ecologically productive area. The Coastal Plain is the birthing ground of the 123,000 member Porcupine Caribou Herd. It is also the most important onshore denning area for the Beaufort Sea polar bears. There are 135 bird species that visit and 70 species that nest on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. Millions of birds depend on the Coastal Plain and migrate there from all 50 states and six continents.

Myth: New technology means we can have oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge and still protect wildlife and the environment.

Fact: Oil drilling is a dirty business. The Prudhoe Bay oil fields, located directly west of the Arctic Refuge, and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline have caused an average of over 500 reported spills each year of oil and other toxic substances.⁴ Benefits of so-called “new” technologies (like ice roads and directional drilling) have been exaggerated. In fact, although they have been around for decades, these drilling practices are often not used due to economic or practical reasons. No matter what technology is employed, oil development will industrialize a unique, wild area that is the biological heart of the Refuge. The Department of Interior concluded that oil development in the coastal plain of the Refuge would result in major impacts to the Porcupine River caribou herd, musk oxen, water quality and quantity, subsistence uses by local residents, and wilderness values.⁵ Although technological advances have reduced the size of individual drilling pads, oil fields continue to sprawl across the rest of Alaska’s North Slope with new roads, pipelines, drill sites, and production facilities built each year.

Myth: A huge oil field of 16 billion barrels of oil will be found in the Arctic Refuge.

Fact: In reality, no one knows how much or how little oil is below the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. But we do know the wildlife and wilderness values of the place. The oil drilling lobby frequently throws out numbers like 16 billion barrels (or thinly disguised equivalents), but a U.S. Geological Survey says that there is less than a 5 percent possibility that the coastal plain of the Refuge and surrounding areas contain that much *technically* recoverable oil, and only a fraction of it could be *economically* produced and brought to market.⁶ By any reasonable estimation, there is far less economically recoverable oil than the United States uses in a single year.⁷

Myth: Drilling in the Arctic Refuge would reduce oil prices.

Fact: Oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge would have no significant impact on oil prices. Even in the year of peak production in 2025, oil from the Arctic Refuge would amount to less than eight-tenths of one percent of the world oil production.⁸ The U.S. Department of Energy predicts that Arctic Refuge drilling wouldn’t reduce the price of gas by more than about a penny per gallon twenty years down the road when it would be at or near peak production.⁹

Myth: Oil from the Arctic Refuge would significantly lessen our dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

Fact: The United States consumes about 25 percent of the world's oil, but has less than 3 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. We simply cannot drill our way to energy independence. If drilling were authorized, it would still take 10 years for oil from the Arctic Refuge to reach the market. According to the Energy Information Administration, Arctic Refuge oil would never reduce U.S. imports by more than a few percentage points.¹⁰

Myth: Energy conservation is not a practical alternative to drilling for oil.

Fact: Energy conservation can save far more oil than is thought to be in the Arctic Refuge and is the nation's best and most direct course to energy independence. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, increasing the fuel efficiency of our vehicles by just 3 miles per gallon would save more than 1 million barrels of oil per day,¹¹ more than the most optimistic projections for peak production from the Arctic Refuge. Energy experts agree that the best way to solve our energy problems is to use existing technology to make our cars and trucks more efficient and to invest in renewable energy.

Myth: We should open up the Arctic Refuge because Alaskans want to drill there.

Fact: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge belongs to the American people. Although some polls have shown that Alaskans are closely divided or slightly favor drilling in the Arctic Refuge, it is not just up to Alaskans to determine what happens in a national wildlife refuge. Like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge exists for all Americans and for generations of Americans to come. Most Americans believe that there are some places so special that they should be off-limits to oil drilling and industrial development, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of them. According to a 2005 bipartisan national survey, 53 percent of the American public believes that drilling should not be allowed in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.¹²

Myth: Alaska Natives support drilling in the Arctic Refuge.

Fact: The Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, which advocates on behalf of 187 tribal governments, supports the Gwich'in Nation's opposition to oil development in the Arctic Refuge.¹³ For centuries, the Gwich'in have been dependent, for their lives and their culture, on the Porcupine Caribou Herd. To the Gwich'in, the coastal plain, the area proposed for drilling and also the calving and nursery grounds of the Porcupine caribou, is known as "the Sacred Place Where Life Begins." Not surprisingly, the Gwich'in are united in their opposition to drilling in the one area most important to the survival of their culture. The Canadian government at the highest levels (some Gwich'in live across the Canadian border), the National Congress of American Indians (representing over 200 tribes), the Tanana Chiefs Conference, the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, the Episcopal Church, and other religious organizations support the Gwich'in position. The Inupiat community of Kaktovik, another community closely involved with the Arctic drilling debate, lives on the North Slope is primarily dependent on the bowhead whale and marine resources. They have strenuously opposed offshore oil development in the Arctic Ocean for decades, including in the area off the coast of the Arctic Refuge due to concerns about impacts to their subsistence resources from noise disturbance and oil

spills. While members of the Kaktovik community within the boundaries of the Arctic Refuge have supported onshore drilling in the past, a large percent of the community members are now questioning how drilling will impact the wilderness and their traditions, including their annual bowhead whale hunt.¹⁴

¹ National Research Council. 2003. Cumulative environmental effects of oil and gas activities on Alaska's North Slope. Pg. 48, 86-88, 117, 126-127, 155-158.

² U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1988. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plans.*

U.S. Department of Interior and U.S. Geological Survey. April 2002. *Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain Terrestrial Wildlife Research Summaries.*

Committee on Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope, Board on Environmental Studies and Toxicology, Polar Research Board, Division on Earth and Life Studies, National Research Council of the National Academies. 2003. *Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope.* National Academies Press: Washington, DC.

³ Nellemann, C. and R.D. Cameron. 1998. "Cumulative Impacts of an Evolving Oil Field Complex on the Distribution of Calving Caribou." *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 76: 1425-1430.

⁴ Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation Spill Database 1996-2004.

⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior. 1987. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain Resource Assessment: Report and Recommendation to the Congress of the United States and Final Legislative Environmental Impact Statement.* Pg. 166.

⁶ United States Geological Survey. 1998. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 1002 Area, Petroleum Assessment.*

⁷ United States Geological Survey. 1998. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 1002 Area, Petroleum Assessment.* (Economically recoverable oil numbers)

Energy Information Administration. March 2004. *Analysis of Oil and Gas Production in ANWR.* (Projected consumption and world oil prices)

⁸ Energy Information Administration. March 2004. *Analysis of Oil and Gas Production in ANWR.*

⁹ U.S. Dept. of Energy, Energy Information Administration, July 2005, "Impacts of Modeled Provisions of HR 6 EH: The Energy Policy Act of 2005, Table C12 (pg 41).

[http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/servicerpt/hr/pdf/sroiaf\(2005\)04.pdf](http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/servicerpt/hr/pdf/sroiaf(2005)04.pdf)

¹⁰ Energy Information Administration. March 2004. *Analysis of Oil and Gas Production in ANWR.*

¹¹ Alson, Jeff. *Calculations for '1 mpg Fleetwide Equals...'*. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Advanced Technology Division. December 2000.

¹² Bellwether Research and Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates joint survey. January 13-17, 2005.

¹³ Beach, Luci. "Human Rights Ignored in Arctic Refuge Decision." *Indian Country Today.* April 21, 2005.

¹⁴ Blum, Justin. "Alaska Town Split Over Drilling in Wildlife Refuge; Oil Money Tantalizes, but Many Fear Effect on Way of Life." *The Washington Post.* April 23, 2005. A01.