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Trump Administration Secretly Pushing Illegal Oil Exploration in the Arctic Refuge

WASHINGTON (Sept. 16, 2017) – The [Washington Post reported today](#) that the Trump administration is secretly taking the first steps towards opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. The *Post* reports that the Department of the Interior (DOI) directed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) [in a memorandum](#) to immediately revise regulations governing oil and gas exploration in the 1.5 million acre Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge.

This unprecedented move directs FWS to revise longstanding federal regulations and ignore over 35 years of legal policy prohibiting ongoing seismic testing and other activities that would threaten imperiled species and fragile habitat. Enabling exploratory activities is a precursor to full-blown commercial leasing and development of oil and gas resources. The national debate over whether to permanently protect or authorize oil and gas drilling in the Coastal Plain – the biological heart of the refuge – is perhaps the most controversial land management and conservation issue of the past four decades.

“The Trump administration will stop at nothing, including breaking the law, in order to exploit our nation’s public resources for private profit,” said **Jamie Rappaport Clark, president and CEO of Defenders of Wildlife**. “This administration is shameless in their pursuit of fossil fuels, even in our nation’s greatest wildlife sanctuary – home to birds, caribou and polar bears. Our wildlife and wild lands are not for sale. The collusion between those hellbent on drilling in the Arctic Refuge is obscene, and we will see this administration in court to put a stop to it.”

In 2014, the state of Alaska unsuccessfully sued the Interior Department to allow for seismic testing in the Coastal Plain; attorney David Bernhardt served as legal counsel for the state. He is now the deputy secretary at DOI, the agency directing FWS to change the regulations and allow for oil exploration.

“Once again, we see another back-door scheme to allow oil activities on the sensitive and

important Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” said **Kristen Miller, interim executive director of Alaska Wilderness League**. “The truth is that oil exploration on the Coastal Plain, like oil production, requires an act of Congress, and nothing this administration might say or do will change that. Congress has voted for nearly 30 years to keep it protected, backed by the overwhelming support of the American people. Some places are too special to drill; the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of those places.”

On August 11, FWS acting director James Kurth [wrote in a memo](#) to the Alaska regional director that, “The [FWS] has been asked by the [DOI] to update the regulations concerning geological and geophysical exploration of the coastal plain, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska... When finalized, the new regulation will allow for applicants to submitted[sic] requests for approval of new exploration plans.”

“What was deemed an illegal request in 2014 is still an illegal request regardless of if it is being made by the state or the department itself,” said **Geoffrey Haskett, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. “The state of Alaska tried and failed in 2014 to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to comply with their illegal request to explore the Arctic Refuge for the purpose of oil gas drilling, yet now, the same people who represented the state in that suit, are now at the Department of the Interior directing the Service to do just that. The Arctic Refuge must be protected from those who seek its permanent destruction for short-term financial gain.”

Since passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge has been protected from oil and gas leasing and development. However, despite immense public opposition to refuge drilling, “Big Oil” and the Alaska congressional delegation have tried for decades to open this special place to resource extraction through unsuccessful federal legislation. Congress has also introduced numerous bills to designate the Coastal Plain as wilderness, a federal legal status that would forever preclude oil and gas development. In its FY2018 budget, the Trump administration proposed that Congress authorize drilling in the Coastal Plain. The House FY2018 Budget Resolution provides the basis for Congress to authorize drilling.

“ANILCA does not allow exploration on the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge,” said **Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney at Trustees for Alaska**. “For over 35 years, Interior’s consistent position has been that the law only allowed a one-time exploration program. That program took place in the 1980s and the law doesn’t allow exploration anymore. Interior has said that over and over and over. The Secretary just defended that position in court and it is the right legal interpretation.”

At more than 19 million acres, the Arctic Refuge is America’s most iconic wildlife refuge and one of the largest remaining intact ecosystems in the world. It provides vital habitat for muskoxen, caribou, brown bears, Arctic foxes and hundreds of migratory birds from across the globe, and a diverse range of wild lands. Its Coastal Plain – one of the last undeveloped expanses of Arctic Ocean coastline –safeguards crucial denning habitat for threatened polar bears and shelters the historic calving ground of the Porcupine Caribou

Herd that totals more than 195,000 animals.

“All Americans should be appalled by the Trump administration’s latest scheme to sell out the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the oil industry,” said **Jamie Williams, president of The Wilderness Society**. “Upending decades of established policy isn't just irresponsible, but it may be illegal. We will not stand idly by while they bend and break every rule for the benefit of special interests.”

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The National Wildlife Refuge Association is the only independent nonprofit that promotes and protects the world’s largest wildlife conservation network: the National Wildlife Refuge System. Learn more at: refugeassociation.org.