

The Trump Administration's Latest: A Plan to Foul the Alaska Arctic

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Just as the world's scientists warn us in the strongest language yet that nations must ratchet up commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement to reduce fossil fuel emissions, the climate-denying Trump administration rolls out yet more plans to make things even worse. The latest proposal: plunder [Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve](#).

A complete disregard for science, conservation, and climate change

Originally created in 1923 to provide a source of emergency oil to the Navy, the 22.8-million-acre reserve is a critical preserve for a multitude of wildlife species. When Congress transferred the land to the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management in 1976, it decreed that any gas and oil exploration [must assure "maximum protection" to recreational, fish, or wildlife areas](#). Taking that directive to heart, the Obama administration in 2013 [limited oil and gas leasing](#) to 11.8 million acres, setting aside nearly half the reserve for wildlife habit.

But now, the Trump administration, in a complete disregard for science, conservation, and climate change, proposes to roll back that directive with [a draft plan](#) that includes options to allow oil and gas operations on between 17 to 18.3 million acres, or up to 80 percent of the reserve.

Republican Representative Don Young [said](#) this would reverse Obama's "overly-restrictive disaster." But the real disaster, of course, is the one already befalling the Arctic as melting ice from global fossil fuel burning forces local wildlife far from traditional areas and feeds sea level rise on a planetary scale.

Pillaging Alaska's natural treasures

In what amounts to a cruel mocking of this reality, the Trump administration's draft plan says with a straight face that it is considering two other scenarios as well. One would leave the reserve as the Obama administration drew it up, to "protect crucial areas for sensitive bird populations and for the roughly 315,000 caribou" in two major herds. The other would actually slightly cut land for oil and gas leasing and increase protections for wildlife, "to prevent additional development in (caribou) habitat and molting goose habitat."

No sane person is taking any bets on those two alternatives getting a fair scientific hearing, considering the administration's other plans to pillage the natural treasures of Alaska. In September, it announced that it plans to [open up to drilling all 1.56 million acres of coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#).

After going through the motions of considering multiple scenarios offering far more environmental protection, the administration chose the most rapacious plan, with the least protection for subsurface exploitation and surface infrastructure development. With no shame, the administration admitted in its plan that climate change combined oil development [“may result in extinction” of many bird species](#), with 69 of the 157 species found on the coastal plain already of significant concern.

The administration also wants to open up the Tongass National Forest to full-scale logging. The Clinton administration banned logging roads in 9.2 million of the forest’s 16.7 million acres to protect the world’s most intact temperate rain forest. The administration wants to slice up the forest even as it admits in its [draft plan](#) that the Tongass contains “wildlife habitats, ecosystems, and visual characteristics, such as coastal islands facing the open Pacific, extensive beaches on inland saltwater, old-growth temperate rain forests, ice fields, and glaciers that exist nowhere else in the National Forest System.”

This blithe disregard is breathtaking even for an administration that is [rolling back more than 80 environmental regulations](#).

What’s at risk

In the National Petroleum Reserve, the proposal for drilling presents a grave threat to wildlife in one of the world’s premier wilderness areas. To understand what might be lost, a good place to start is the assessments that led to the 2013 regulations, drawn up under Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. Among the major reasons given to prevent oil and gas exploration on nearly half the reserve were to:

- Protect special habitat for nesting, breeding, molting, staging and migration for waterfowl and shorebirds and calving grounds for caribou in and around [Teshekpuk Lake](#), the largest inland body of water on the reserve, and close to the ecologically sensitive North Slope
- Protect breeding grounds for caribou in the [Utukok River Uplands](#) in the western part of the reserve
- Protect haul-out areas and habitat for seals, walrus and polar bears
- Protect habitat for peregrine falcons and other raptors;
- Protect the “free flow, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values” of several rivers essential to wildlife.

The Trump administration’s proposal would shrink the protected area around [Teshekpuk Lake](#) and potentially open the area to exploitation. This is despite a 2011 study finding that the lake had such a density of breeding birds that it should “be considered for permanent protection.”

A 2012 study led by researchers from the US Fish and Wildlife Service found that the density of shorebirds such as sandpipers and plovers was among the highest in the international Arctic. Combined with research on caribou and geese, their study concluded that permanent protection for the lake region “is certainly warranted.”

More specifically, [Audubon Alaska says](#) the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands complex provides [breeding grounds for 600,000 shorebirds](#), has the highest-known nesting concentrations of near-threatened yellow-billed loons, a denning area for polar bears and hosts all four of the

world's species of eider sea ducks. It provides molting and post-nesting resting areas for up to 100,000 greater white-fronted geese, brant, cackling geese and snow geese. "There are no other known areas that support such large numbers of four species of molting geese across the Arctic," Audubon says.

Of particular concern to conservationists is the fact that the [number of caribou](#) calling Teshekpuk Lake home fell from 69,000 in 2008 to 39,000 in 2014. The cause of the drop is uncertain, but some scientists say climate change is adversely affecting food sources. They predict that oil and gas development is likely to make things worse as there is evidence that industrial operations scare herds away from their most preferred areas.

A needless environmental disaster

It is not difficult to anticipate the overall effects of the Trump administration's willful degradation of the Arctic. A [2003 study](#) by a National Research Council committee unanimously agreed that expanding oil and gas operations was ill advised, "certain to exacerbate some existing effects and to generate new ones— possibly calling for regulatory revisions."

This does not even begin to discuss the likely human costs in the area. The Obama administration concluded that opening up the entire National Petroleum Reserve to oil and gas development would [reduce wildlife herds for subsistence hunting](#). The emissions, dust, and noise of operations and erosion of traditional diets and culture with development "will lead to worsened public health outcomes."

In 2013, the Obama administration took that into consideration when it tried to strike a balance between the original purpose of the National Petroleum Reserve Alaska and the realization that there is much more than oil to preserve. Now, as the need to wean ourselves off fossil fuels is more urgent than ever, the arguments for protecting these already-threatened wildlife populations are stronger than ever.

In the thrall of the fossil fuel industry, the Trump administration pretends there is an Arctic in which no birds, seals, or caribou exist. If they are allowed to continue their needless and reckless environmental policies, that world may yet come to pass.

If the reserve is opened to mass plunder, wildlife will be sitting ducks for devastation. There are still opportunities for the public to raise its voice against this. The public comment period for opening up the Tongass is open until December 16; you can [submit your comments here](#). The public comment period on the National Petroleum Reserve is open until January 21; [submit your comment here](#).

There is time to act before Alaska's goose, figuratively and literally, is cooked.

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