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The Western Arctic: Protecting America's Arctic



Northern Alaska
Environmental Center

www.nrdc.org/policy

Alaska's Western Arctic wilderness is under siege from local and global forces being shaped by human actions: Oil and gas drilling, coal mining, and invasive development are combining with global warming's effects to wreak havoc on this vast, remote landscape. From the hilly tundra and wild rivers of the southern Western Arctic, to the wetlands, ponds, and clear deep waters of Teshekpuk Lake in the north, this special wilderness area—home to a stunning array of wildlife, including caribou, polar bears, beluga whales, and shorebirds—deserves our protection. We must push back against federal government attempts to convert this landscape to a sprawling expanse of bulldozers and oil rigs.

The Western Arctic

Oil and Gas Development Threatens Native Alaskans' Way of Life

Alaska's North Slope: A Precious Place in Peril

The U.S. government set aside the "National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska" (Reserve) in Alaska's Western Arctic in 1923. This 23 million-acre area is the largest block of public land in the nation, with wild lands that sweep south from the Arctic Ocean to the continental divide of the Brooks Range mountains. Its wetlands, coasts, and wild rivers are home to millions of migratory birds and caribou and provide cultural sustenance for the four Inupiat (Eskimo) villages within its borders, as well as dozens of other Alaska Native communities. But pressure from the oil and gas industry threatens to expose most of this unspoiled expanse to invasive drilling, and the U.S. government has failed to step in to permanently protect Alaska's critical habitats and vulnerable wilderness. As interest from oil and gas industries spiked, the Bush administration Energy Task Force pushed for more leasing in the Reserve.

In the North: Protecting the "Largest Lake of All" from Oil and Gas Drilling

Teshkepkuk Lake, which means "The Largest Lake of All," was named by early Inupiat (Eskimos). It is located in the vast network of wetlands and coastline in the northernmost region of the Western Arctic. Teshkepkuk Lake and its watershed comprise key nesting, feeding, staging, and molting habitat for ducks, geese, swans, and other waterbirds, as well as caribou calving and insect relief grounds.

Bending to industry pressure, since 1999 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has made more than 13 million acres of the Western Arctic available to oil leasing. In 2006, the BLM planned to auction oil leases in even the most sensitive goose molting and caribou calving grounds around Teshkepkuk Lake—but were halted by conservationists' legal action. Earlier, the Interior Department rolled back its protections against roadless developments and buffer zones. And in a move that paved the way for invasive new development, in 2006 the BLM approved ConocoPhillips' plans for the first oil field development within the Reserve.

*"It's our garden. It's where we gather our food...
It's a very sensitive area"*

DORA NUKAPIGAK, RESIDENT OF THE INUPIAT VILLAGE OF NUIQSUT, THE COMMUNITY CLOSEST TO TESHEKPUK LAKE



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Dating back as far as 11,000 years, humans have inhabited the Western Arctic. Teshkepkuk Lake was named by the early Inupiat, the people who depend on the region's watersheds for subsistence hunting and fishing. Although the oil industry claims that development will have a small footprint on this region, the experience of the people in the Inupiat village of Nuiqsut near the Alpine oil field shows a different reality. Their testimony describes displaced caribou, wildlife disrupted by industrial operations, and a cumulative negative impact to the region's wildlife, subsistence, and Inupiat culture. Alaska's North Slope Borough has opposed the BLM's expansion of leasing around Teshkepkuk Lake.

Oil Drilling Threatens Special Wildlife Areas and Biological Hot Spots

In 1976, Congress recognized the need to protect certain special areas in the Western Arctic, namely Teshkepkuk Lake, Colville River, and the Utukok Uplands, and directed the Interior Department to study these and other areas for protection. Congress instructed the Interior Department "to meet the energy needs of the Nation," with "maximum protection" of fish, wildlife, and other surface values. An appropriations rider in 1980 opened the area to an expedited leasing program, yet still no special areas were granted permanent protection. Audubon Alaska has proposed biological "hot spots" for protection from leasing and oil development. Yet the BLM has ignored this balanced proposal and instead moved to open nearly 100 percent of the northern half of the Reserve to leasing. At risk are:

- **Black brant and other geese** that feed around the many lakes and ponds.
- **Caribou** that calve and seek relief from insects in the area around Teshkepkuk Lake in unusually large numbers.
- **Waterfowl and shorebirds**, including rare yellow-billed loons that breed nowhere else in the United States, concentrations of rare stilt and buff-breasted sandpipers, and threatened Steller's and spectacled eiders.
- **Spotted seals and beluga whales**, which gather in large numbers in Kasegaluk Lagoon on the Chukchi Sea coast to feed, bear their young, and molt.
- **Polar bear** denning areas at Dease Inlet-Meade River and Peard Bay.
- **Fossils of bison, horse, mammoth, and other mammals** that date to the late Pleistocene era, some 10,000 to 35,000 years ago.
- **Critical nesting and feeding habitat** for migratory birds.

At Teshkepkuk Lake, as many as 37,000 Pacific brant—one-third of the world's population—molt in the area each year, fattening up on lush wetland plants alongside two types of geese (greater white-fronted and Canada) and a caribou herd 45,000 strong.



In the South: Alaska's Colville River and Utukok Uplands Threatened by Destructive Mining

The Western Arctic's Utukok Uplands and Colville River special areas sweep over about a fourth of the 23 million-acre Reserve. The southern portion of the Reserve consists primarily of the upper watershed of the Colville River and remote foothills and mountains with outstanding wilderness values. Now both the Alaska Natives and the wildlife on which they depend face mounting pressure from the coal mining and natural gas industries. Although the Reserve remains closed to coal and hard rock mining by law, in 2005 the Interior Department began a planning process that could set the stage to open the Reserve to mining.

The Colville River special area stretches from the river's headwaters in the Brooks Range foothills to the spectacular cliffs at Ocean Point near the village of Nuiqsut. This 2.3 million-acre area includes two large tributaries, the Kikiakrorak and Kogosukruk rivers. The Colville is the largest Alaskan river to flow into the Arctic Ocean. Long known as one of the most significant regions for raptors in North America, the area provides nest sites and hunting habitat for Arctic peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, and rough-legged hawks. The Colville's rich streamside also provides habitat for songbirds, moose, wolves, grizzly bears, and more than 20 species of fish.

Included in the Colville watershed are several proposed national natural landmarks and a host of important archeological sites. The Utukok, Colville, and Upper Etivluk and Nigu Rivers are wild, very remote, and contain significant cultural sites. Archeologists have found 13 species of dinosaur fossils in the Colville River area, which boasts fossils from the late Cretaceous period—some 68 million to 73 million years ago. Ocean Point, at the river's northern big bend, is the world's best-known site for Theropods, a fast-running, meat-eating cousin of the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Trackways from eight dinosaur species run along the river, evidence that many prowled the region 90 million to 110 million years ago. Ancient prints from crane-sized and smaller birds from 70 million years ago mark the Colville, as do mammoth, steppe bison, and horse fossils.

The Utukok Uplands span 4 million acres in the western corner of the Reserve. This special area comprises critical calving, insect relief, and migration routes for the 490,000-strong Western Arctic caribou herd—Alaska's largest. Calf survival is higher in these traditional calving grounds, and females nursing their young need unrestricted movement to reach and use the calving areas. Insect-relief habitats are essential to the health of the herd because here the caribou gather in huge clusters and quickly move long distances to respond to insect harassment—conditions that make them more vulnerable to industrial disruption. More than 40 Alaska Native villages depend on the Western Arctic caribou herd for subsistence and cultural needs. The Utukok Uplands area is also prime habitat for brown bears, wolverine, and wolves, and boasts concentrations of cultural and archeological sites. The Utukok Uplands special area should be expanded south to encompass the Brooks Range continental divide.

Coal Mining and Development Put Southern Reserve in Jeopardy

Though the southern portion of the Western Arctic lacks significant oil resources, it possesses some natural gas and mineral deposits, including phosphate rock, zinc, lead, silver, barite, copper, and fluorite. And most significantly, the southern Reserve contains one of the world's largest reserves of coal. Large concentrations of high-quality bituminous coal reach from the Chukchi Sea coast east to the Colville River. This coal belt also runs through the Utukok Uplands, its major deposits lying underneath nearly half the Western Arctic caribou herd's concentrated calving grounds.

Industrial development in the southern areas of the Reserve—strip mining, oil and gas drilling infrastructure, and accompanying roads, railways, ports, and power lines combined with offshore oil exploration and drilling in the Chukchi Sea—would displace caribou herds and disrupt calving, insect relief, and migration habitat, damage unique grizzly and wolverine habitat in the Western Arctic, and reduce fish populations. Similarly threatened are the 40 caribou-dependent Alaska Native villages that rely on hunting and fishing for subsistence harvests. Wilderness in the Utukok Uplands, wild rivers, and remote Brook Range bordering Noatak National Preserve would be lost.

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Global Warming Hits the Arctic

The Arctic is facing severe global warming impacts at the same time as industrial development harms the land, animals, and human culture. Global warming adds an increased level of complexity for



predicting consequences for birds, caribou and other wildlife in the Reserve. The rising temperatures caused by global warming have already increased shoreline erosion and permafrost thawing, changed snow cover and plant growth, and altered insect ecology. With so much of Alaska's wilderness already feeling the heat of global warming impacts, it is irresponsible to create additional sources of global warming pollution—from oil development in the north and from coal mining in the south—that threaten these wild places.

The Future of the Western Arctic

The Arctic is on the front line of global warming impacts: not only do warming temperatures threaten the area's wildlife and ecosystems as well as human activities, but now oil and gas companies are destroying the region to drill for more fossil fuels that will only accelerate the pace of climate change.

The U.S. government should seek a balanced approach across America's Arctic that provides wilderness protection to the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the east, and in the Reserve in the Western Arctic, permanent protection for its most biologically and culturally important areas and wilderness values. Any development that does occur within the Reserve should adhere to strict environmental standards, including those related to operations, cleanup, and restoration.

There is special urgency for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by developing substantial renewable energy sources and transitioning away from burning fossil fuels. Healthy, productive ecosystems are fundamental for ensuring a sustainable economy for Alaska and for living up to our nation's commitment to protect our public lands for future generations.

