

ARTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Why the Refuge Matters

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a special place in God's creation that is unique in its wildness, ecological integrity, beauty, spiritual significance, and unique recreational opportunities. While much of the Refuge is managed under a formal Wilderness designation that prohibits resource exploration, the 1.5 million acre Coastal Plain of the Refuge is not protected as Wilderness and could be opened for oil drilling by an act of U.S. Congress. The Coastal Plain is a biologically diverse and ecologically sensitive region of the Refuge where the Porcupine caribou herd travels each year to birth their young.

The faith community advocates to protect the Arctic Refuge not only because of our concern for and stewardship of God's creation, but also because of our commitment to the human rights of the Gwich'in people. For thousands of years, the Gwich'in have depended upon the Porcupine caribou for their daily subsistence. The caribou provides for almost 75 percent of the Gwich'in diet. In addition, the spiritual beliefs of the Gwich'in, who are predominately Episcopalian, are tied to the Porcupine caribou. The Gwich'in creation story states that the Porcupine caribou and Gwich'in people are spiritually connected and must care for one another. Oil exploration on the Coastal Plain would significantly disrupt the Porcupine caribou's birthing patterns, ultimately threatening the survival of both the caribou and Gwich'in people.

The Arctic Refuge has been a battlefield in a long-running war between green groups and supporters of oil- and gas-driven economic development in the state. Congress prevented oil and gas development on most of the land in a 1980 law, but left open an option for a future congressional vote to allow energy exploration in a 1.5-million-acre section near the Arctic coast. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the finest examples of wilderness remaining anywhere in the world. It supports an impressive diversity of wildlife including two caribou herds, all three species of North American bears, moose, lynx, wolverines and more – the 1.5 million acre Coastal Plain in particular is a nursery for caribou, polar bears and countless migratory birds.

Policy Info

The Trump administration's fiscal 2018 budget proposal pitches a variety of legislative changes to boost federal revenue from the oil and gas industry, including the sale of oil and gas drilling leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Alaska's congressional delegation, led by Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski, has pushed to open that portion of the Arctic Refuge, introducing a bill that would enable development in that area, which is 60 miles away from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. This fall, drilling in the Arctic Refuge was included in the tax bill passed by the Senate. It was not included in the House version that passed. Currently, the Senate and House are in negotiations in a conference committee to iron out the differences and then vote for a final bill. Twelve House Republicans

sent a letter to House leadership urging them to not include drilling in the Arctic Refuge in the final tax bill.

Religious Response

In October 2016, leaders from diverse religious traditions delivered a petition to members of Congress signed by more than 110,000 people of faith calling for the strongest possible protection for the Arctic Refuge. This fall, 15,000 petitions from the evangelical community were delivered to Senate offices and the black church in South Carolina sent a petition to South Carolina Senators with 651 clergy signers and 5,654 congregant signers. In the fall, Catholic leaders from New York and Pennsylvania sent a letter to their Congressional leaders urging that Arctic drilling not be included in the tax reform bill. This outpouring of religious support for the Arctic Refuge is unprecedented – both in its magnitude and its diversity -- and is the latest expression of the faith community's ongoing efforts to ensure congressional wilderness designation.

Talking Points

- The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a special place in God's creation that stands alone in its unique wildness, ecological integrity, beauty, spiritual significance, and recreational opportunities.
- Faith communities have long opposed drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, not only because of our concern for stewarding God's creation, but also because of our commitment to standing with the Alaska Native Gwich'in Nation. The Gwich'in people, a vast majority of which are Episcopalian, rely on the Porcupine Caribou for 80% of their diet and have a strong spiritual tie to the caribou. Oil exploration or drilling would devastate the Caribou and jeopardize the Gwich'in community's ability to feed itself and maintain its spiritual heritage.
- The religious community sees protecting the Arctic Refuge as a justice issue and a matter of religious liberty
- The exploitation of fossil fuels that contribute to climate change threatens the subsistence practices of the Gwich'in people, ten thousand year-old traditions that the Gwich'in depend upon to survive. Our commitment to protecting the Arctic Refuge is inspired by our dedication to defending all of God's creation, including the fundamental rights of the Gwich'in people.
- Drilling in the Arctic Refuge does not belong in a tax reform package. Not only is the revenue generated speculative, but such a controversial proposal should go through the regular legislative process not be a rider to a tax reform bill.
- A majority of Americans oppose drilling in the Arctic Refuge.