

Case 14

Drilling for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) has been a source of contention among policy makers for years. In 1980 Congress expanded ANWR by 9.5 million acres, with 1.5 million acres (known as section 1002) set aside for the study of petroleum production potential. In 1987, 1991, and 1995 legal measures to drill in the 1002 area were proposed and defeated. The issue was raised again when President George W. Bush made drilling in section 1002 part of his national energy agenda. The events of September 11, 2001 have resulted in intensifying the debate.

Proponents make three major arguments for drilling in ANWR: (1) In light of recent economic downturns and the unstable diplomatic situation in the Middle East, the U.S. must increase domestic oil supply in order to decrease dependence on foreign oil. (2) The area occupied by wells and drilling equipment has shrunk by approximately 60% since the development of the Prudhoe Bay oil field. Developments in drilling technology allow a single pad to tap multiple oil pockets at distances of up to four miles. These advances have minimized the environmental impact of petroleum extraction. As evidence, production supporters point to the fact that despite fears to the contrary, the caribou herd in the Prudhoe/Kuparuk oil field region has increased in population. (3) Most Inupiat Eskimos in the area favor oil leasing for the economic opportunities exploration may provide.

Opponents of drilling counter that (1) even if section 1002 produces the maximum projected amount, oil consumption will continue to rise exponentially. Conservation (such as increasing vehicle fuel efficiency), rather than expanding production, note the opponents, is the only long-term solution. (2) The negative ecological impact on the area outweighs any potential benefit from oil production, in the opinion of the opponents. The plain of section 1002 provides critical calving area for a caribou herd five times as large as the Prudhoe/Kuparuk herd in an area one-fifth the size. Development in this areas, the opponents contend, would push the herd into the foothills where calves would be prone to predation and starvation from scarcity of resources. (3) The opponents point out that not all Native Americans favor drilling. The Gwich'in Indians, for example, consider the area sacred. The Gwich'in also subsist on caribou and fear the negative impact that petroleum production might have on the herd.

The controversy remains unresolved. Since control of the Senate switched last year, Majority Leader Tom Daschle (Democrat, South Dakota) has vowed to defeat a bill passed in the House of Representatives that would tap ANWR. On the other hand, Chairman of the House Resource Committee Jim Hansen (Republican, Utah) argues that in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks drilling in ANWR is more important than ever, and has urged the Senate to pass the House energy bill in the interest of national security.