



OIL DRILLING IN ALASKA BECOMES FOCUS OF POLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEBATE

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As the price of gas goes up, environmentalists and oil industry advocates are butting heads over plans to begin oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a federally protected region that sits atop an estimated 10.4 billion barrels of oil.

Members of the U.S. Senate last week struck down a proposal banning oil exploration in the coastal region of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a remote area of land in northern Alaska that serves as a haven to animal and plant species and is believed to house billions of barrels of oil beneath its surface.

The vote, which angered many environmentalists, was a victory for President Bush who has pushed to open the area to drilling as part of his plan to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil. In addition to providing heat in millions of American homes, oil is processed into the gas that fuels millions of cars.

A national refuge

The refuge known as ANWR, was created in 1960 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower who placed the land and its wildlife under federal protection. The area, mostly frozen tundra, lies north of the Arctic Circle and is home to more than 45 species of land and marine mammals. Millions of migratory birds nest along its coastal plains, and polar bears, grizzly bears, moose and caribou roam free. The refuge also houses a tribe of 220 Native Alaskans.

Environmentalists refer to the region as “North America’s Serengeti,” after the fertile plains of East Africa where thousands of animal species travel during an annual migration.

But ANWR also sits above one of the countries largest untapped oil reserves, according to government geologists. In 1998, the U.S. Geological Survey, the government agency that studies natural resources, estimated that the region could contain about 10.4 billion barrels of undeveloped oil.

The argument over whether to begin looking for that oil has pitted oil industry advocates against environmentalists who argue that introducing oil pipelines, drilling platforms and other exploration equipment could harm the land and its inhabitants.

The possibility of black gold

According to the mostly Republicans who voted to allow drilling in ANWR, the amount of oil present in the region could have a significant impact on U.S. oil production. American oil companies currently produce 2.1 billion barrels of oil a year, mostly from Alaska, California and Texas. However, that output is only 30 percent of total U.S. consumption – 7 billion barrels a year. The remaining oil is imported from countries in the Middle East and Africa. Unrest in that region and skyrocketing oil prices have left U.S. companies demanding other alternatives.

"ANWR, with the potential for 1 million barrels of oil a day, will be the most significant onshore production capacity of any onshore area in the United States," said New Mexico Republican Sen. Pete Domenici.

President Bush has argued that opening part of the refuge to drilling could benefit the economy in several ways, especially as oil prices -- and thus gas prices -- have hit record highs recently.

"Developing a small section of ANWR would not only create thousands of new jobs, but it would eventually reduce our dependence on foreign oil by up to a million barrels of oil a day," the president said.

Opposition to drilling

The Sierra Club, a non-profit environmental group, has argued that even if American companies were allowed to drill oil from ANWR, the small amount they would get, would not benefit consumers.

"With only 5 percent of the world's population, the U.S. consumes 26 percent of the world's oil," the organization reported.

"At its peak of production, Arctic Refuge oil could supply perhaps 1 percent of America's energy needs at any given time -- not enough to put a dent in our dependence on foreign oil."

The organization has called on President Bush to revise his energy plan to include other sources of energy.

"Our nation needs a comprehensive energy policy based on conservation, alternative energy sources, and improved efficiency standards -- such as making our cars go farther on a gallon of gas."

If the government does allow companies to begin drilling in the refuge, it could take up to 12 years for oil to reach the market.

-- *Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for Online NewsHour Extra*

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