

BLOCKING EFFORTS TO STOP ALASKA OIL LEASING

Passed: 214-199

SUMMARY:

The House passed a bill to prevent the President or the Department of the Interior from placing a moratorium, suspending, or otherwise attempting to prevent or pause oil and gas leasing in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, policies that would open the Arctic Refuge to drilling and have devastating consequences for its biological integrity. (*May 1, 2024, Roll Call No. 174*).

BACKGROUND:

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the crown jewel of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Spanning 19 million acres, the Arctic Refuge is home to an incredible array of wildlife, including more than 300 animal species. Iconic animals such as caribou, polar bears, wolves, foxes, and muskoxen roam the Arctic Refuge's vast and wild landscapes. Notably, the Arctic Refuge is the most important land-based denning habitat for polar bears. In rivers and coastal waters, numerous fish species thrive in the Arctic Refuge. In the sky, dozens of species of birds, including some traveling from as far as Asia and South America, migrate to the Arctic Refuge to nest. One of the Arctic Refuge's most famous residents is the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which relies on the Coastal Plain for calving. The caribou are central to the area's ecology and to the Gwich'in people who have a deep cultural connection to the caribou.

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge is at the heart of a conflict between those working to safeguard this globally significant ecosystem and those who prioritize the extraction of the hydrocarbon resources beneath the land. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) protected the Coastal Plain from oil leasing "until authorized by an act of Congress." For decades Congress and the President declined to pursue leasing the Coastal Plain. However, Congress authorized a leasing program in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act which instructed the Bureau of Land Management to establish an oil and gas leasing program with at least two lease sales. The Congressional Budget Office projected bid revenues of \$1.8 billion from these two sales. The Trump Administration held the first lease sale in January 2021; no major oil company bid, and bid revenues totaled only \$14.4 million, but nine leases were issued. On his first day in office, President Biden issued Executive Order 13990 which temporarily halted the leasing program. Two of the leases were voluntarily relinquished. In September 2023, the Biden Administration canceled the remaining leases. By law, the second lease sale must happen by December 2024.

In November 2023, Rep. Pete Stauber (R-Minn.) introduced H.R. 6285, or the "Alaska's Right to Produce" Act, which sought to open the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas leasing with little to no oversight. H.R. 6285 nullifies any order or action by the President or the Secretary of the Interior to suspend or pause the leasing program. Additionally, the legislation significantly reduces regulatory and judicial oversight, making it easier for oil and gas development to proceed unchecked. For example, the bill would require the Department of the Interior to reissue cancelled leases and conduct a second lease sale within 30 days of the bill's enactment. In a further blow to wildlife, H.R. 6285 also blocks the Secretary of the Interior from designating or expanding Special Areas within the Western Arctic (NPR-A).

OUTCOME:

On May 1, 2024, the House passed H.R. 6285, the Alaska's Right to Produce Act, 214-199. "No" was the pro-conservation vote.