

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ALASKA CHAPTER

POSITION STATEMENT OF THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ON THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The Arctic National Wildlife Range (now Refuge; ANWR) was established in 1960 to protect wildlife and wilderness values for human use. In 1980 Congress enlarged the Refuge to almost 19 million acres, expanded the Refuge purposes, and designated 8 million acres of mountain terrain as Wilderness. At the same time Congress required of the Secretary of the Interior an assessment of petroleum and wildlife values of the Refuge's 1.5-million-acre Arctic Coastal Plain (or "1002 Area") and reserved to itself the decision whether to allow oil and gas leasing and extraction within that area. The assessments are complete and the Secretary of Interior has recommended leasing of the entire 1002 Area on the grounds that the chance of discovering very large oil reserves outweighs the unavoidable risks to fish and wildlife habitat and populations

Bills have been filed in Congress to open the Coastal Plain to leasing as recommended by the Secretary, but public sentiment is sharply divided on this issue. Counter measures have been filed to designate the entire area as Wilderness closed to leasing. Opposition to exploration and development stems from concerns about the integrity of ANWR as Wilderness, and opposition to leasing of the entire 1002 Area stems from concerns about impact of development on wildlife. This position paper deals only with the latter issue.

The impacts of oil and gas development on fish and wildlife are dependent on the timing, extent, location, intensity, and carefulness of petroleum exploration, development, and extraction activities. With present knowledge of the fish and wildlife resources of ANWR and of the functioning of arctic ecosystems, primary biological concerns under the petroleum extraction scenarios presented by the Department of Interior include:

1. The well-being of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, now numbering about 200,000, which in most years calves and seeks relief from insect harassment on the Coastal Plain of the Refuge, especially the 1002 Area, migrates throughout ANWR, and winters in Yukon Territory and northeastern Alaska, including South Slope portions of ANWR;
2. The well-being of muskoxen, reintroduced to ANWR in 1969, which now number approximately 600 on the North Slope, are rapidly expanding their population size and distribution, and a majority of which depend on riparian and adjacent upland habitats in the 1002 Area;
3. The well-being of polar bear, brown bear, wolverine, and other species of which numbers

have declined following development in other areas;

4. The effects of disturbance on up to 325,000 snow geese that breed in Canada and obtain energy for fall migrations while feeding in late summer in the Foothills and Coastal Plain of ANWR and adjacent Yukon Territory;
5. The effects of displacement of wildlife from the 1002 Area through increased human activities and community development on human uses of wildlife;
6. Dewatering of streams and lakes due to demand for large quantities of water during exploratory and production drilling and oil extraction operations;
7. Loss of scarce fish overwintering areas, maintained by year-round springs, through winter water withdrawal, gravel extraction, road and pipeline construction, and other activities;
8. Loss and alteration of riparian shrub communities that are productive and often critical habitats for birds and mammals such as muskoxen;
9. Disruption of nearshore marine and brackish water ecosystems through use of causeways, drill pads, freshwater withdrawal, and other petroleum-related facilities;
10. Releases of toxic materials into wetlands, waterways, and the atmosphere from drill-mud disposal pits, camps, oil spills, and other sources;
11. The potential for localized overharvest of fish and wildlife due to facilitation of human access; and
12. The unknown, long-term, and cumulative effects of circumpolar arctic development on the arctic environment.

If oil is sought, found, and extracted in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge some losses of wildlife habitat and populations are inevitable. Although experience at Prudhoe Bay and other arctic areas provides some basis for guiding development, present knowledge of fish and wildlife resources in ANWR is inadequate for generation of thorough recommendations to minimize impact of full-scale petroleum development. For example, the relationships of Porcupine caribou with their calving and summer habitats on the Coastal Plain are not well understood. Similarly, we have little understanding of the potential effects of disturbance on migratory geese, or of the effects of human activities on the movements and habitat use of muskoxen.

Human interests in the well-being of ANWR wildlife are best served at this time by excluding development activities entirely, or by limiting development until additional knowledge is obtained. Congress can exclude all development by designation of the entire 1002 Area as Wilderness or by taking no further action to open the 1002 Area to such development at this time. The "no action" alternative would allow further review and wildlife research prior to a permanent decision.

If Congress decides against total exclusion of petroleum activities from the Refuge, it and executive agencies can take steps to minimize short- and long-term fish and wildlife habitat losses. In this case, we recommend the following:

1. Congressional designation of approximately 600,000 acres of the southeast portion of the Coastal Plain (Fig. 1) and the proposed Sadlerochit Spring Special Area as an area with no development for petroleum at this time; this will protect most of the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, important muskox habitat, preferred snow goose staging areas, and sensitive streams and rivers until additional information is available to better guide development in this most sensitive area;
2. Congressional authorization of exploration, but not leasing, on the remainder of the 1002 Area, provided that appropriate mitigation measures are implemented to minimize disturbance to caribou, muskoxen, snow geese, and other wildlife; if exploration reveals recoverable oil reserves, Congressional authorization of leasing in certain areas and under such conditions to minimize impacts based on results of research during exploration;
3. Congressional commitment of adequate resources for research on caribou, muskoxen, snow geese, and other species to assess impacts and develop refined mitigation measures;
4. Implementation of a strict policy of minimal road and facility development incorporating adequate setbacks from lakes, streams, and marine nearshore environment adjacent to the Refuge to minimize adverse effects on these important habitats;
5. Appointment by Congress of a special commission composed of experienced, knowledgeable professionals in the fields of wildlife, fisheries, geology, petroleum development, and environmental design to provide policy-level guidance to Congress for general measures to protect fish and wildlife resources during oil and gas exploration and development, to oversee additional predevelopment research needs and review the results and conclusions from this research in order to apply such conclusions to mitigation measures during development, and to provide recommendations on long-term monitoring of industrial impacts on key fish and wildlife species and critical aspects of their environments;
6. Establishment of a joint federal/state organization with representation from appropriate agencies for preparation and implementation of appropriate regulations and other mitigation measures to protect fish and wildlife habitats and populations during project design and construction, and to provide day-to-day oversight of development activities in the field; and
7. Establishment of a procedure, with adequate funding, for removal of all development-related facilities and habitat rehabilitation after oil extraction is completed.

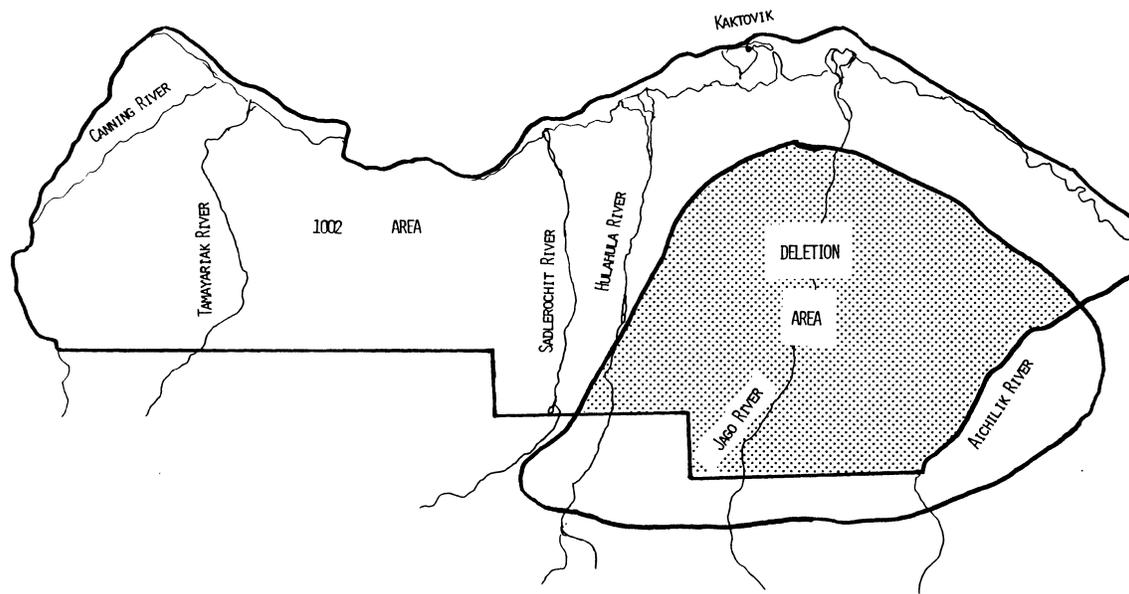


Figure 1. "1002 Area" of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Shaded portion recommended for deletion from exploration and development at this time.