

US Interior Dept approves oil drilling in Arctic refuge

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The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is home to polar bears such as this one, photographed on sea ice northeast of Prudhoe Bay in Alaska

The US Department of the Interior approved oil and gas drilling on Monday in Alaska's pristine Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal that drilling leases could be auctioned off by the end of the year.

Environmental groups vowed to fight the move to allow drilling in the remote area of northeast Alaska which is home to [polar bears](#), caribou and other animals.

"Our climate is in crisis, [oil prices](#) have cratered, and major banks are pulling out of Arctic financing right and left," Adam Kolton, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League, said in a statement.

"And yet the Trump administration continues its race to liquidate our nation's last great wilderness, putting at risk the [indigenous peoples](#) and iconic wildlife that depend on it."

The then Republican-held US House of Representatives and Senate approved oil leases in part of the vast federally-owned refuge three years ago.

"Congress gave us a very clear directive here, and we have to carry out that directive," Bernhardt said. "I have a remarkable degree of confidence that this can be done in a way that is responsible, sustainable and environmentally benign."

With oil prices at 15-year lows and potential deposits unknown, it is unclear how much bidding interest there will be among the major oil companies.

"We will continue to fight this at every turn, in the courts, in Congress and in the corporate boardrooms," said Kolton of the Alaska Wilderness League.

"Any oil company that would seek to drill in the Arctic Refuge will face enormous reputational, legal and financial risks."

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