

Biden administration halts oil drilling in Alaska wildlife refuge

June 2 2021, by John Biers



President Joe Biden suspended oil development activities on the the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, shown here in August 2001.

US President Joe Biden's administration announced Tuesday it was halting petroleum development activity in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, reversing a move by former president Donald Trump to

allow drilling.

The Interior Department said it was notifying firms of the freeze, pending a comprehensive environmental review that will determine whether leases in the area known as ANWR should be "reaffirmed, voided or subject to additional mitigation measures," the agency said in a statement.

The announcement deals a blow to the long-contested quest of oil companies to drill in the sensitive territory. The push for development picked up momentum after Trump announced the leasing plan last November shortly after losing reelection to Biden.

At a lease sale in January over some 1.6 million acres, US officials auctioned off 11 oil tracts. Major oil companies sat out the bidding, and nine of the leases went to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, a state agency, while two went to small companies.

Biden had promised to protect ANWR during the presidential campaign.

White House climate advisor Gina McCarthy noted Biden's promise and said the move reflected his belief that "national treasures are cultural and economic cornerstones of our country," according to a White House statement.

Biden "is grateful for the prompt action by the Department of the Interior to suspend all leasing pending a review of decisions made in the last administration's final days that could have changed the character of this special place forever," McCarthy added.

Environmentalists have long argued that safeguarding ANWR is critical to protect polar bears and other vulnerable wildlife and for indigenous populations that hunt caribou in the region.

But the oil industry has long sought to drill in the area, which is thought to potentially hold billions of barrels in oil. Key Alaska lawmakers such as Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski, have strongly backed development.

The Alaska Wilderness League, which had joined other environmental groups in litigation against the Trump administration's development efforts, applauded the Biden administration's action.

"Suspending these leases is a step in the right direction," said Kristen Miller, acting executive director for the Alaska Wilderness League.

Continued threat

"There is still more to be done. Until the leases are canceled, they will remain a threat to one of the wildest places left in America," Miller said. "Now we look to the administration and Congress to prioritize legislatively repealing the oil leasing mandate and restore protections to the Arctic Refuge coastal plain."

But the American Petroleum Institute said the oil industry knows how to develop responsibly and that the decision will cost Alaska jobs and tax revenue.

"Policies aimed at slowing or stopping oil and natural gas production on federal lands and waters will ultimately prove harmful to our national security, environmental progress and [economic strength](#)," API official Kevin O'Scannlain said.

"At a time of economic recovery, this action only serves to withhold the good-paying jobs and economic revenue that safe and responsible oil and gas development would provide to local Alaskan communities."

The Biden administration's move on ANWR comes only days after it sanctioned another Trump administration plan on oil [development](#) in Alaska, involving a ConocoPhillips project in Alaska's North Slope in the former Naval Petroleum Reserve.

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