

# Biden administration releases draft environmental review for major Alaska oil project

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The Biden administration on has released a draft supplemental environmental review of ConocoPhillips' giant oil prospect on Alaska's

North Slope, known as the Willow project, after a federal judge last year rejected approval for the project issued during the Trump administration.

The announcement Friday drew immediate condemnation from [environmental groups](#), saying advancing the project is contrary to the president's stated goals to address [climate change](#). Alaska's political leaders have pressed the Biden administration to move the project forward, given the project's potential in terms of oil production, jobs and revenues for the state.

The environmental review is a step in ConocoPhillips' efforts to develop the field, though the new, eight-volume report provides a range of development alternatives for the public to consider before the Biden administration can make a final decision on whether to approve the project.

The release of the review will open a 45-day public comment period.

The Willow project is located in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, west of Prudhoe Bay and near the Arctic Ocean.

ConocoPhillips has not yet decided to fund the project, but the oil company has studied Willow for years and believes it will cost \$8 billion and create more than 2,000 construction jobs and 300 permanent jobs. It is expected to produce more than 100,000 barrels of oil daily for decades.

Conservation groups have fought the project, saying it threatens important habitat for migratory waterfowl, caribou and threatened polar bears, such as at large Teshekpuk Lake, and will contribute to more global warming. Industry advocates and many Alaska leaders say the project can help stabilize future oil prices and support the state's

economy, after oil flows following years of development.

The Bureau of Land Management in Alaska, in a statement Friday, highlighted one new development alternative in the draft environmental review that it said would reduce Willow's potential footprint. The proposal would remove two of five proposed drill sites from consideration, including eliminating the northernmost proposed drill site and associated infrastructure in the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area.

BLM expects that under this alternative, ConocoPhillips would need to give up "significant" lease rights it acquired in the special area. The proposal includes a possible fourth drill site, but approval of that would require an additional environmental review process under federal law, the statement said.

The draft review includes a "corrected and expanded analysis of potential climate impacts" associated with the Willow project, the agency said. It seeks to address the court's finding that the original analysis failed to consider downstream foreign emissions from future consumption of oil from Willow.

The agency will also consult with groups under the Endangered Species Act concerning listed species, including polar bears, and consider mitigation measures and updates to the range of alternatives.

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said in an interview Friday that seeing Willow developed is at the top of her priority list for the Biden administration.

"I've been leaning on them since the very beginning, trying to impress on them what this means for Alaska, our economy, jobs, what it means to fill up TAPS," she said, referring to the trans-Alaska pipeline.

She said she will stay on the administration to make sure the timeline toward a final decision stays on track. In a statement Friday, Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, said he too had pressed Biden on the project, saying "he and his team gave me their commitment to fully support the Willow Project."

"We're not there yet and have a ways to go, but this is a step in the right direction on an energy project which is enormously important for Alaska and America," Sullivan said.

The Wilderness Society condemned the project and said it would add more than 250 million metric tons of greenhouse-gas carbon dioxide to the atmosphere over the next 30 years, if approved. It would also lead to additional oil development in Alaska, the group said.

"No other oil and gas project has greater potential to undermine the Biden administration's climate goals," said Karlin Itchoak, the group's state director. "If this project were to move forward, it would result in the production and burning of at least 30 years of oil at a time when the world needs climate solutions and a transition to clean energy."

Conservation groups in 2020 sued to stop the project, saying the agency underestimated the plan's harm to wildlife, among other factors.

U.S. District Court Judge Sharon Gleason last year ruled that BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service incorrectly approved the project.

The Biden administration had backed the Willow project in the case, a departure from efforts by the administration to throw roadblocks before other Alaska resource development efforts, including in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

But the administration and ConocoPhillips declined to appeal Gleason's

decision, leading to the federal government's supplemental environmental review process announced in February.

The agency plans to hold in-person public meetings in Utqiagvik, Anchorage and Nuiqsut, as allowed under public health measures, as well as three virtual public meetings, the statement said.

"A subsistence-related hearing to receive comments on the proposed project's potential to impact subsistence resources and activities will also be held in Nuiqsut concurrent with the in-person public meeting," the agency said.

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