

UN Environment Programme

Acknowledging the "Willow Project" with regard to its consequences on the environment



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Introducing Your Chairs



“Hi, I’m Lucas. I am 15 years old and I am from Romania and Spain. One of my hobbies is water polo and this is my second time chairing.”

An Introduction to the Topic

The Willow Project is an oil drilling project situated in the wetlands of North Slope Alaska, managed by the energy company ConocoPhillips. It was originally approved under the Trump administration but scaled down by the Biden administration after legal challenges.

The project has been heavily criticized online, by both social media and news websites and there have been over 3 million signatories to an online petition criticizing it.

Despite receiving backlash from environmental groups, the project counts on widespread support from Alaskan natives, including all three of Alaska's congressional delegations.

Criticism focuses mainly on the environmental damage and future emissions caused by the project. The proponents on the other hand, focus primarily on the economic benefits, claiming it would increase the quality of healthcare and education in the region.

Definition of Key Terms

National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A)

The NPR-A is the largest stretch of undisturbed public land in the United States, 95,506 square kilometers in size and situated on the north slope of Alaska. It was established in 1923 by President Harding as a naval petroleum reserve to help transition the navy off coal to oil. In 1976, the reserve was transferred to the Department of the Interior (DOI), which appointed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to manage oil and gas leasing.

The reserve is considered of high ecological importance, supposedly containing a higher density of birds than the nearby Arctic Refuge. This is concerning, considering the project encroaches on the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, home to the lake's Caribou herd and over 40% of the North Slope's aquatic birds. The company ConocoPhillips announced in 2017 a new oil discovery on its leases in the NPR-A, capable of producing at least 100,000 barrels of oil a day.

Despite campaigning to end drilling on federal lands, the Biden administration has approved the Willow project to extract the oil, arguing that a refuse would lead to an expensive, taxpayer funded, lawsuit. Rather than risk a lawsuit, which could reportedly cost them as much as 5 billion, the administration has opted to reduce the scope of the project, striking a deal to decrease the surface area to be developed by 60% and announcing it was putting 13 million acres of the NPR-A off-limits for future projects.

Pay

In geology, "significant pay" refers to a rock formation containing significant amounts of economically valuable natural resources, in this case fossil fuels. It means the area is considered worth developing or exploring further, for possible economic gain.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

An Environmental Impact Statement is a report called for by the national Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). It assesses the consequences of projects deemed to have a significant effect on the human environment's quality.

In the case of major federal involvement, the report must also consider the physical cultural and human environments affected and disclose any potential harm.


A General Overview of the Issue

There are two key environmental effects to take into account regarding the project, regional and global. The National Resources Defence Council (NRDC), an environmental NGO, claims that the Willow project will not only exacerbate the effects of climate change internationally, but devastate the NPR-A's Pre-Willow pristine ecosystem. They estimate that the project will release 260 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide over its lifetime, or the equivalent of adding roughly 2 million gas-cars to the road.

On the topic of global emissions, the Willow project has been described as a "carbon bomb", leading the NRDC to link the project with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report urging nations to stop burning fossil fuels. When it comes to regional impacts, a report by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership highlights the key effects. They note that the project will result in "532 acres of lost wetlands, 619 acres of potential polar bear habitat disturbances, and 17,037 acres of disturbances for birds", however they acknowledge that the government is considering additional safeguards for 13 million acres of the NPR-A and withdraw 2.8 million of acres of sea from development.

Furthermore, Nuiqsut residents, those closest to the project, have reported seeing sick fish, malnourished caribou and polluted air, resulting from the oil and gas extraction nearby. A letter by the native village and city of Nuiqsut cited negative health impacts on locals and loss of access to food as primary reasons for opposing the project. ConocoPhillips now faces a possible \$914,000 fine after a "shallow underground blowout" of a well led to a day-long gas leak on a different project in the area last year. Even the BLM's SEIS predicted negative effects on the public health, subsistence and sociocultural system of the native population.

Proponents, on the other hand, claim that the project will reduce dependence on foreign oil, most likely produced to lower environmental standards. The BLM report estimates that if the project were cancelled, 52% of replacement energy would be imported foreign oil that would not only have worse environmental impacts but additional emissions related to shipping. This is significant considering the U.S. recently tightened rules to reduce the amount of Russian oil reaching their shores in response to the war in Ukraine.



ConocoPhillips also maintain that the project is designed with wildlife in mind. The project includes design features such as seven-foot high pipelines to aid caribou movement and no powerlines to minimize disturbance for birds. All permanent infrastructure is situated outside of “polar bear critical habitat” and at least 152.4 meters away from fish-bearing waters. They also collaborate with scientific firms and agencies to provide data on air quality and wildlife, among other things.

All in all, the project has faced backlash from environmental groups, creating significant opposition online for its potential to exacerbate global warming. It has also been opposed by the local city of Nuiqsut, where inhabitants have reported negative health effects from nearby oil and gas drilling. The Biden administration has reluctantly accepted the project claiming their “hands are tied” but reduced the scope to address some environmental concerns. They are now facing continued legal challenges from environmental groups. Work has already begun on an ice road, which is only possible in winter.

Historical Background

The Willow Project area is found in the North Slope of Alaska, a district found to the north of the Brookes Mountain range, which includes the NPR-A and part of the ANWF.



The NPR-A was originally established in 1923 as the Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4 but was transferred to the Department of the Interior (DOI) in 1976. Oil and gas leasing was authorized in 1976 under the Naval Petroleum Reserves Production Act and the BLM was tasked with conducting the sales.

ConocoPhillips acquired its first Willow-area leases in 1999, however they only received significant pay in 2016 after drilling two exploration wells. They sought permission to operate 5 drill sites for the project in 2018 and were approved in 2020 by the Trump administration. Permissions were rescinded in 2021 after legal action by the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska and work began on a supplemental EIS to address the concerns raised by the judge.

Despite campaign promises to end drilling on Federal lands, the Biden administration approved the project once again in 2023, albeit somewhat reduced in scope, featuring 3 wells rather than 5.

The move was widely critiqued by environmental groups and became a phenomenon on TikTok, with the hashtag “StopWillow” amassing almost 50 million views and reaching the top 10 trending on the app.

Major Parties Involved

ConocoPhillips

ConocoPhillips is the result of a merger between the companies Conoco and Phillips 66 in 2002, specialized in hydrocarbon exploration and extraction. The company is Alaska's largest crude oil producer and owns approximately 1.2 million undeveloped acres in the state. It argues that its Willow project will be beneficial for the economy and self-reliance of Alaska but has previously been criticised for downplaying environmental risks and was featured on a list of the 20 most polluting energy companies.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

The BLM is an agency within the DOI, tasked with overseeing almost 1 million square kilometres of public land. Its mission is stated as “sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.” It has been responsible for auctioning oil and gas leases in the area since 1981 and approving the Willow project on March 13, 2012. Following the decision, it published a supplemental EIS mandated by state law to evaluate the consequences of projects on the human environment. The report concluded that according to their models, in a world without willow, less than 10% of the energy not produced at Willow would be taken from natural gas or renewables. This supports the argument that the Willow project will be “one final push” to cover the energy gap during the transition to renewables. The DOI did, however, manage to reduce the number of drill pads by 40% and reclaim 68,000 acres of leased land from the company.

United States of America (U.S.A)

Development was initially approved under the Trump administration, and was reapproved in 2023 by the Biden administration after a federal Judge in Alaska ruled that the environmental analysis needed to be redone. The administration justified their apparent breach of campaign promises to stop drilling on federal land by claiming their “hands were tied” due to Conoco’s pre-existing leases in the area.

The administration intends to designate around 2.8 million acres of the Beaufort sea for protection and block leases on over 13 million of the 23 million acres that is the reserve, in an attempt to appease environmental groups.



Earthjustice

The environmental NGO Earthjustice aims to combat climate change and preserve the environment through legal action. They joined forces with the Natural Resource Defence Council, another NGO, to file a lawsuit against the decision to permit the Willow Project. They claim the administration failed to take into account the “full climate impact” of the project and did not take into account meaningful alternatives.

Alaska Native Groups

The project has been generally well-received among the Alaskan natives however it has faced backlash from native environmental groups and was criticised by the neighbouring city of Nuiqsut, found about 58 kilometres from Willow. Its leaders are concerned with the threat climate change poses to the caribou and called the additional income “payoffs for the loss of [their] health and culture”. On the other hand, the mayor of Utqiagvik, the northernmost community on the Arctic Ocean, claims the majority of people and people in her community were excited for the Willow project. Supporters often argue that revenue from the project will help fund schools and hospitals in the area leading to better quality of life. Encouragingly, the secretary of the North Slope Tribal Council reports that members continue to meet in an attempt at reconciling their views.

United Nations Environment Programme

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) states their mission as improving “quality of life without compromising that of future generations”. It is comprised of 193 member states and aims to help the world meet the Sustainable Development Goals, and is also responsible for establishing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Previous attempts to solve the issue have come from both ConocoPhillips and environmental groups, as well as the U.S. government.

ConocoPhillips have implemented a number of measures to reduce the impact on wildlife and argue that their oil will help meet internal energy demand while adhering to strict U.S. regulation. These measures include seven-foot high pipelines, road and pipeline separation and no power lines, minimising disturbance to Caribou, birds and other animals.

Environmental groups have repeatedly threatened legal action against ConocoPhillips and the U.S. government. Two lawsuits were filed the day after approval by however both lawsuits were dismissed by a federal judge in November. Since then, courts have rejected injunctions. Earthjustice intends to appeal the decision.

The Biden administration has taken several steps to reduce the impact of the project such as reducing the number of oil wells planned from 5 to 3. Additionally, they have cancelled the seven leases remaining in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR), which were originally by the Trump administration and set some 13 million acres of the NPR-A off limits. They are however legally bound to hold another lease sale in the ANWR in 2024, something the administration intends to respect. The last lease sale featured surprisingly little interest from oil and gas companies, in part due to the negative public image associations.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Climate Change, appointed by the Human Rights Council (HRC) requested to advise the judge on the human rights implication of Willow during the lawsuit by the environmental groups arguing it would “aggravate the climate crisis”. ConocoPhillips have opposed the “friend of the court” brief to advise the judge claiming the rapporteur’s lawyers have links to the environmental groups and are therefore not independent.

Even the clothing brand Patagonia attempted to weigh in against the project, arguing the project would exacerbate climate change, leading to diminished sales of outdoor clothing.

Possible Solutions For The Issue

Considering UNEP's previous activities in addressing pollution and raising awareness, they are well positioned to tackle the environmental impacts of the Willow project. They work closely with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) a source of funds for climate adaptation. Their climate related work includes reporting on situations, aiding the transition to clean energy and financing low-income communities to adapt to climate change.

They are known to work closely with local groups so it would be possible for them to collaborate with ConocoPhillips and the U.S. government to develop guidelines for environmental protection in Alaska, perhaps including additional protections to the Beaufort sea, NPR-A and ANWR. They could also discuss measures to mitigate the impact on the climate of the oil produced. Maintaining the quality of life of Alaskan natives is also essential so they could allocate funds to promoting Alaskan native culture and improving their socio-economic situation.

Timeline Of Key Events

1976:

Reserve transferred to the Department of the Interior.

1980:

Public Law 96-514 passes, authorising “an expeditious program of competitive leasing of oil and gas” in the NPR-A.

1999:

BLM holds its first NPR-A lease sale since 1984. ConocoPhillips acquires the first Willow-area leases.

2016:

ConocoPhillips drills two exploration wells in the final year of the Obama administration, encountering significant pay in the Willow region.

May 2018:

Willow seeks permission from the BLM to operate 5 drill pads with 50 wells each, including roads, airstrips and pipelines, as part of the Willow project.

August 2019:

BLM publishes a project development plan after consulting tribal entities and holding public hearings in the region.

August 2020:

BLM approves the development of the Willow project under the last quarter of the Trump administration.

October 2020:

BLM publishes record of decision.

August 2021:

The U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska challenges federal permits for the project, claiming the Environmental Impact Statement fails to take into account foreign greenhouse gas emissions and the requirement to afford “maximum protection” to the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, among other things.

July 2022:

BLM publishes draft supplemental EIS in response to the court order.


February 2023:

Supplemental EIS is finalised after input from Alaskan natives.

March 13, 2023:

Biden administration approves the project and work begins immediately on the ice-road, as it can only be built in winter.

March 14, 2023:

Earthjustice files lawsuit on behalf of environmental groups aiming to block the Willow project. The willow project is hit with a second lawsuit that day, requesting the federal Alaska court to annul the permit.

September 2023:

Biden ends drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR) but not in the Willow area.

November 2023:

U.S. district court upholds decision to approve the project. Earthjustice appeals the decision.

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