

Biden Administration to Bar Drilling on Millions of Acres in Alaska

The administration will cancel oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and set aside more than half of the National Petroleum Reserve.

By [Lisa Friedman](#)
New York Times

In its most aggressive move yet to protect federal land from oil and gas exploration, the Biden administration announced on Wednesday that it would prohibit drilling in 13 million acres of pristine wilderness in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska and cancel all drilling leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The new regulations would ensure what the administration called “maximum protections” for nearly half of the petroleum reserve but would not stop the enormous \$8 billion Willow oil drilling project in the same vicinity, which President Biden approved this year.

Climate activists, particularly young environmentalists, [were angered by Mr. Biden’s decision](#) in March to allow the Willow project, calling it a “carbon bomb.” Many called the move a betrayal of Mr. Biden’s campaign promise of “no new drilling, period” on federal lands and waters.

Since then, the administration has taken pains to emphasize its efforts to reduce the carbon emissions that result from burning oil and gas and that are driving climate change.

“We have a responsibility to protect this treasured region for all ages,” Mr. Biden said in a statement. “Canceling all remaining oil and gas leases issued under the previous administration in the Arctic Refuge and protecting more than 13 million acres in the western Arctic will help preserve our Arctic lands and wildlife, while honoring the culture, history, and enduring wisdom of Alaska Natives who have lived on these lands since time immemorial.”

The Biden administration had promised some new protections in the Arctic when it approved the Willow project. The policies announced on Wednesday, however, go significantly farther by canceling the refuge leases and explicitly prohibiting new oil and gas leasing in 10.6 million acres of the petroleum reserve. An additional 2.4 million acres would be subject to strict safeguards, requiring the Bureau of Land Management to show that any development would result in minimal effects on wildlife.

“Biden was surprised by how angry environmental nonprofits were over Willow” and is trying to return to their “good graces,” said Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice University.

Deirdre Shelly, campaigns director for the Sunrise Movement, said young people remained angry about the Willow decision and that the new Arctic protections did not make up for it. But she did praise the new announcements as “exactly the sort of thing young people and people in the climate movement want to see from the president.”

Yet the decision carries some political risk, because oil prices are on the rise and Republicans are accusing Mr. Biden of harming the country’s energy independence, despite the fact that United States oil production is poised to break records this year.

The move also could face opposition from some Alaska Native groups that argue that communities depend on drilling for jobs and revenue to support schools and other public services.

And it is likely to face a legal challenge from the fossil fuel industry.

“Today’s announcement sets a concerning precedent for the future of oil and natural gas leasing on federal lands, said Holly Hopkins, a vice president at the American Petroleum Institute, which represents oil and gas companies. She accused the Biden administration of sending “mixed signals” about drilling in the United States.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was opened to drilling under President Donald J. Trump, a move that outraged environmentalists and overturned six decades of protections for the area, the largest remaining stretch of untouched wilderness in the United States.

The refuge in the northeastern corner of Alaska is home to grizzly and polar bears, snowy owls, migratory birds and herds of moose and caribou.

But it also sits atop an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil and, for years, the fossil fuel industry, members of the Alaskan congressional delegation and state leaders have lobbied for drilling. In 2017 Congress passed, and Mr. Trump signed, a tax law that not only authorized but required leasing for drilling in the wildlife refuge.

The Trump administration held a lease sale that attracted just three bidders, including the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, a state agency. Most of the major oil companies stayed on the sidelines.

On his first day in office, Mr. Biden signed an executive order halting Arctic drilling and in 2021 suspended the leases that had been granted by the Trump administration, citing problems with environmental reviews. Last month a federal judge rejected a challenge

by the state of Alaska, saying the federal government had the authority to suspend the leases while it conducted an additional environmental analysis.

That review found “multiple legal deficiencies” in the analysis that had been conducted by the Trump administration. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said two of the leases in the refuge had been canceled and refunded at the request of the leaseholders. The remaining leases held by the Alaska development authority covered about 365,000 acres in the coastal plain and were rescinded Wednesday.

“There are some places where oil and gas drilling and industrial development simply do not belong,” Ms. Haaland said. “With today’s action, no one will have rights to drill for oil in one of the most sensitive landscapes on earth. Climate change is the crisis of our lifetime, and we cannot ignore the disproportionate impacts being felt in the Arctic.”

Average temperatures in the Arctic are increasing [about four times as fast as the rest of the globe](#). The area is often described as “ground zero” for climate change because of record-breaking heat, thawing permafrost and glacier melt.

“We know that our sacred land is only temporarily safe from oil and gas development,” said Bernadette Demientieff, the executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, an Alaska Native group opposed to drilling. “We urge the administration and our leaders in Congress to repeal the oil and gas program and permanently protect the Arctic Refuge.”

The Alaska development corporation denounced the Biden administration for canceling its leases and said it would take the Interior Department to court.

“This time, we will ask the court to allow us to conduct discovery that could include taking the deposition of Biden’s messenger, Secretary Haaland, and possibly other administration officials involved so the real motives are made public,” the agency said in a statement.

John Leshy, a public lands expert who served in the Interior Department during the Carter and Clinton administrations, noted that the state had been the only remaining leaseholder in the refuge. The Biden administration could have standing to cancel those leases, he said, if it found that environmental reviews and other compliance measures on the leases had been inadequate.

Mr. Leshy said the outcome of a legal fight between Alaska and the Biden administration was not predictable.

“The bigger picture here is that no one but the state sees any future in drilling the refuge,” he said.