

WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
HEARING ON REPUBLICAN ENERGY BILL "ENERGY SECURITY ACT"

JULY 11, 2001

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House Resources Committee
House of Representatives, U.S. Congress
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
ATTN: Nancy Laheeb

Attachments:

1) Letter to President Bush from over 500 scientists and resource managers asking for permanent protection of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, dated 20 March 2001.

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The importance of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for polar bears and how they might be affected by oil development have not been fully considered. I speak as a polar bear biologist who has studied bears in the Arctic refuge and directed polar bear research and management programs for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I have been a member of the international Polar Bear Specialist Group and of the delegation that negotiated the international Agreement on Conservation of Polar Bears and have served on the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission and the Alaska Board of Game.

The Arctic refuge is of special importance to polar bears because of the maternity denning habitat it provides. Cubs are born in a winter snow den and require its protection for the next three months. Polar bears have a low reproductive rate and any activity that reduces denning success

could cause a population decline. About half the denning bears of northern Alaska den on land and half den on sea ice. During the past 20 years, 44 percent of the land dens were on the refuge and 33 percent on the coastal plain where development is proposed. Use of terrestrial dens appears to be increasing. The number of dens on the refuge was significantly greater than if denning occurred uniformly along the coast, possibly because of the refuge's protected status.

Individual bears differ in their response to denning area disturbances. Some bears den successfully near development activities and others abandon dens early, mid-way, or late in the denning period. The potential for adverse effects to denning bears is great if the Arctic refuge is opened to oil development.

Polar bears also use the coastline of the refuge for feeding, moving about, and resting during early fall before freeze-up. This is an increasing trend with more bears occurring on the refuge and in greater densities than on coastal areas with development to the west. In 2000, some coastal stretches of the Refuge had about one bear per mile.

Things other than disturbance can affect bears. Oil spills from support ships, tankers, loading facilities, and offshore drilling could harm bears that come into contact with the oil, as could ingestion of other contaminants associated with oil development. Oil and other contaminants could also harm the marine food web upon which polar bears depend.

Global warming, now causing thinning of Arctic sea ice, could reduce the amount and quality of pack ice suitable for denning and make protection of the Arctic refuge and other land denning areas even more important. Climate change would cause environmental stress for bears and likely result in animals being in poorer nutritional/physical condition. This would then lower the birth rate for a species with an already low recruitment rate. Consequently, it is even more important to protect high-quality terrestrial denning habitat.

The international Polar Bear Specialist Group at its most recent meeting (June 2001) described environmental contaminants in the Arctic marine system as a new threat to polar bears. Recent studies have revealed particularly high levels of persistent organic pollutants in bears in certain areas. High levels of the contaminants are reducing the ability of polar bears' immune systems to combat disease and are also affecting hormonal systems. The Polar Bear Specialist Group states that the greatest challenges to conservation of polar bears in the future may be ecological change in the Arctic because of climate change and pollution, and that lack of information calls for more proactive management. Contaminants in the marine environment indicate a need for special protection for important polar bear terrestrial habitat.

Effects of development would be cumulative and the overall effect could be even more severe if similar impacts result from activities elsewhere along the Alaskan and Canadian Beaufort coasts. Intensive development has occurred to the west at Prudhoe Bay and adjacent areas and development is starting offshore and still further west in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

Advocates for oil development state that new technology would result in less environmental impact because drilling pads would have smaller "footprints". However, the somewhat smaller pads would still be connected by pipelines and roads, resulting in a significant industrial complex.

Development would also result in widespread seismic exploration with large overland vehicles. In the search for smaller pockets of oil, seismic lines would be closely spaced and different oil companies would each run their own set of seismic lines to obtain proprietary data before bidding for leases. The only real mitigation measure for adverse effects of oil development to polar bears would be prohibition of oil-related activity from September through April. To concentrate all activity during the rest of the year is not acceptable, however, given the importance of the coastal plain to caribou and other wildlife and the vulnerability of unfrozen tundra in the summer.

International treaty obligations call for protection of habitat and animals. The United States is a party to the Agreement on Conservation of Polar Bears which states that parties shall take appropriate action to protect ecosystems of which polar bears are a part, with special attention to denning and feeding sites and migration paths, and shall manage populations with sound conservation practices. Oil development on the Arctic refuge coastal plain would appear to violate the agreement. The agreement also states that polar bears may be taken (hunted, killed, or captured) only for certain purposes, which do not include taking to resolve bear-human conflicts or mortality of cubs displaced from dens, both of which could result from development activities in bear habitat.

Purposes for which the Arctic refuge was created include conservation of fish and wildlife populations and habitat, including specifically for polar bears, and meeting fish and wildlife treaty obligations. Purposes do not include oil development. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for managing the refuge and the agency position regarding polar bears and the refuge is clearly stated. In a 1995 Habitat Conservation Strategy for Polar Bears, the Service stated the importance of the area to bears and supported its continued status as a refuge closed to oil development.

The position of the Canadian government on Arctic refuge development, enunciated in 1987, is that polar bears are particularly sensitive to human activities during the denning period, that disturbance can cause premature den abandonment leading to death of cubs, and that the most prudent action for conservation of Beaufort Sea polar bears would be wilderness designation for the coastal plain.

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society, comprised of professional wildlife biologists throughout Alaska, in a July 2001 position statement said that petroleum exploration and development are not warranted on the coastal plain, an area critical to the abundance and diversity of wildlife and fish in the entire refuge. The chapter urged Congress to provide adequate, long-term protection for the coastal plain to meet wildlife population and habitat concerns.

In conclusion, oil production from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge does not justify the risk that development poses to polar bears. Other areas of northern Alaska have oil that can be extracted with less effect to polar bears and other wildlife. Polar bear habitat in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should receive permanent protection.