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PUBLIC LANDS: Alaska poised to become battleground over wild lands policy

By Scott Streater,
E&E reporter

The first major debate over the Interior Department's new wild lands policy could center on the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), where the Bureau of Land Management is working to develop a first-ever comprehensive land management plan for the 23.5-million-acre reserve on the state's oil- and gas-rich North Slope.

The policy, set forth in a Dec. 22, 2010, secretarial order from Ken Salazar, has drawn scorn from Republican lawmakers who argue the Obama administration's public lands policies have sharply reduced domestic oil and natural gas production, including in NPR-A and the nearby Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Nevertheless, Alaska's wild lands rank among the highest priorities for environmental groups seeking to pre-empt a drilling flurry by setting aside sizeable new acreage in both NPR-A and ANWR, which remains a primary target of pro-drilling lawmakers in both Alaska and Washington, D.C.

Environmental groups and Democratic lawmakers last month marked the 50th anniversary of ANWR's designation as a wild-



Alaska's vast North Slope could see new development restrictions under the Interior Department's new wild lands policy. Photo courtesy of Audubon Alaska

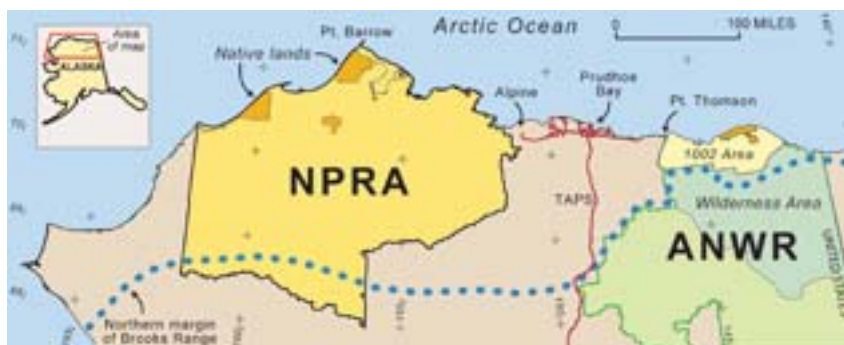
life refuge by reiterating their wishes to designate as much as 1.5 million acres of the refuge as wilderness. And a month earlier, 50 House Democrats sent a letter to Obama asking him to adopt the "strongest possible" environmental protections for the refuge (Greenwire, Dec. 2, 2010).

But the stakes could get higher still if the new wild lands policy leads to development restrictions on portions of NPR-A, whose very purpose is to provide an emergency oil supply in times of crisis. NPR-A has been a

designated oil reserve since 1923, when its resources were allocated to the Defense Department. The site transferred to Interior Department management in 1976.

Several groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, say they plan to ask BLM to designate large portions of NPR-A as sites worthy of wilderness protection, meaning no development could occur on them without the expressed permission of the Interior Department.

"They should be designated as wild lands under this policy,"



The 23.5-million-acre National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska lies on the North Slope of the Brooks Range west of Prudhoe Bay and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It is the largest contiguous tract of public land in the United States. Map courtesy of USGS.

said Brendan Cummings, CBD's senior counsel and public lands program director.

"NPR-A contains some of the best wilderness quality lands in the United States. It's an entire ecosystem that's essentially intact, which is rare, and our position is it should remain intact," Cummings added.

Another proposal, from the Wildlife Conservation Society, would establish protections for three particularly sensitive areas of NPR-A -- Teshekpuk Lake, the Utukok River Uplands and the Colville River -- while leaving much of the rest of the reserve open for drilling (Land Letter, Oct. 21, 2010).

BLM last fall began work on its first comprehensive land management plan for NPR-A, and the agency is conducting an environmental impact statement (EIS) for drilling and other forms of development in the region that should be completed in 2012, said Jim Ducker, an agency spokesman in Anchorage.

But Ducker said the EIS process will also include analyzing the reserve for its wilderness values, and it is possible that some areas of NPR-A could be considered for designation as wild lands.

"I think we can say with some certainty that we will be looking at what lands have wilderness character and are appropriate, given the context of NPR-A, to be considered for designation as wild lands," he said. "It's certainly in play, but how that will come out in the range of management alternatives [for NPR-A] is too early to tell."

Strong opposition

Such a move would meet stiff resistance from the Obama administration's energy policy critics, who say the Interior Department has already tipped the scales too far toward conservation at the expense of development of domestic oil and gas.

Richard Ranger, a senior policy adviser with the American Petroleum Institute, said the industry is wary of the new wild

lands policy, calling it "a very significant step" and "one of a sequence of steps that this administration has made and continues to make to restrict access to domestic energy resources."

"We are concerned," Ranger said.

So are Alaska's top elected officials, including Sen. Lisa Murkowski, the ranking Republican on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and veteran Rep. Don Young (R), the former chairman of the House Resources Committee who will lead the revived Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs in the 112th Congress.

Young last month said in a statement that he was "disgusted" by what he termed the Obama administration's latest effort to sidestep Congress and give itself permission to establish new wilderness areas.

"The extreme environmentalist groups couldn't get their wilderness bills past Congress and so now they are circumventing this country's legislative body and having the agencies do their dirty work," Young said. "It's disgraceful."

Robert Dillon, a spokesman for Murkowski, who lost last year's GOP primary to the pro-development tea party candidate Joe Miller but reclaimed her seat as a write-in candidate, said the senator "would go out of her way" to oppose any effort by Interior to designate portions of NPR-A as wild lands. "It's not something

that we're just going to let quietly happen," he said.

Dillon said that Murkowski is also in line to become the ranking Republican on an appropriations subcommittee that helps set Interior's annual funding. He added that the senator will "have to look at attacking their funding" if BLM moves forward with unpopular proposals.

"If this is something they're spending their money on, if they're going to waste money on something like this, then they have too much money," he said.

Ongoing battle

Salazar's wild lands order is just the latest in the ongoing battle in Alaska over how best to balance sensitive wildlife habitat and domestic energy production.

While having a generally lower profile than ANWR, NPR-A remains a vast and virtually untapped resource. A U.S. Geological Survey analysis in October estimated the reserve could produce about 900 million barrels of crude oil and as much as 53 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Yet even with its resource richness, NPR-A has remained largely idle since Congress transferred the site from the Pentagon to the Interior Department in 1976. It supports no commercial-scale production, and experts attribute the slow pace of development in part to the North Slope's distance from major oil refineries and markets.

Even before last month's wild lands order, Interior officials had indicated they would consider recommending that Congress designate portions of NPR-A as wilderness. Such designations remove the land from all forms of development, including oil and gas drilling, road building and pipeline construction.

Short of formal wilderness designations, environmental groups have asked BLM to implement "no lease" provisions that would ban drilling in the three areas of the reserve considered to have the greatest wildlife and ecological values -- Teshekpuk Lake, the Utukok River Uplands and the Colville River.

These areas, which comprise about 8 million acres of the reserve, provide key habitat for prairie falcons, golden eagles, grizzly bears and Alaska's largest herd of caribou.

"Clearly there are some areas of NPR-A that should not be leased for drilling," said Eric Myers, policy director of Audubon Alaska. "The key word here is balance. It's not a question of whether there will be oil and gas development in NPR-A, because there will be. But it is completely appropriate to discuss where and how."

Ranger, the API senior policy adviser, said that implementation of the new wild lands policy should forego any per-

manent removal of large swaths of NPR-A from development. He pointed to a 2008 study conducted by Interior that determined more than half of federally managed land nationwide is off-limits to drilling.

"There's this notion that there's a shortage of wild lands among the nation's inventory of public lands," he said. "Not only is the footprint by industry on public land very small, but overall the amount of public land set aside for parks and wilderness constitutes the majority of public land."

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