

New Management Plan For Alaska Petroleum Reserve

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — A new management plan for the vast National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska splits the Indiana-size area roughly in half between conservation areas and land available for petroleum development, and allows pipelines carrying oil or gas to be constructed through the federal reserve.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced Thursday he had signed a record of decision for the reserve west of Prudhoe Bay and south of Barrow on Alaska's North Slope. He said the balanced approach under the plan was the result of extensive local testimony.

"This comprehensive plan will allow us to continue to expand our leasing in the NPR-A, as has happened over the last three years, while protecting the outstanding and unique resources that are critically important to the culture and subsistence lifestyle of Alaska Natives and our nation's conservation heritage," Salazar said.

Perhaps as important to the petroleum industry was the commitment to access through the reserve for a pipeline that can connect oil drilled offshore in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas to the trans-Alaska pipeline. The management plan provides "explicit confirmation" that potential pipelines carrying oil or gas can be constructed through the reserve, Salazar said in his announcement.

The Bureau of Land Management manages the reserve and estimates that lands made available for development contain nearly three-fourths of estimated economically recoverable oil and over half of the estimated economically recoverable gas.

The reserve covers 23 million acres, and access to petroleum will be allowed on 11.8 million acres that are estimated to hold 549 million barrels of recoverable oil and 8.7 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas.

Salazar in August released details of a preferred alternative, and his signing of the management plan was expected.

The department received more than 400,000 public comments.

Salazar characterized the reserve as an "iconic place on our Earth."

The reserve is home to the 325,000 animals in the western Arctic caribou herd and the 55,000 animals in the Teshekpuk caribou herd. Hunters from 40 northern and western Alaska Native villages rely on the caribou as a subsistence resource.

The plan through an expansion of a Teshekpuk Lake Special Area continues restrictions on development near renowned habitat for migratory waterfowl, including black brant, Canada geese and greater white-fronted geese.

It also creates the Peard Bay Special Area and enlarges the Utukok River Uplands Special Areas, boosting special areas in the reserve from 8.3 million acres to 13.35 million acres.

Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska regional director for The Wilderness Society, said Peard Bay is important for its wetlands and waterfowl habitat. The entire coast is habitat for threatened polar bears plus seals and walrus looking for places to rest as more summer sea ice melts, she said. Utukok River Uplands, she said, is primary calving grounds for the Western Arctic Caribou Herd and provides elevation and breezes where the animals can get relief from insects.

Wilderness Society President Jamie Williams in a statement called the plan a fair and thoughtful decision that balances conservation, Alaska Natives' needs for subsistence resources, and the nation's demand for energy.

Joshua Reichert of Pew Charitable Trusts called the decision the Obama administration's crowning land conservation accomplishment to date.

But Brendan Cummings, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said that additional areas should have been protected.

"Like most things Obama, this plan is better than the Bush-era plan it replaces but far short of what we need in terms of both energy policy and protection of our most sensitive wildlands," he said. "In an era of dangerous climate change, we simply should not be opening up any of our public lands to fossil fuel development."

Previous management plans covered the northeast and northwest areas of the reserve. The new plan is the first that covers the entire reserve.