



Lawsuit filed to block bridge to Alaska petroleum

By Dan Joling

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ANCHORAGE — An Army Corps of Engineers permit granting ConocoPhillips permission to build a bridge across the Colville River to reach oil leases within the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska was challenged in federal court Wednesday by an environmental group.

The Center for Biological Diversity claims the Corps conducted inadequate environmental review and did not consider the effects on endangered species before granting the permit in December 2011.

“We’re deeply concerned that this project could kick the door open for industrial development in the reserve’s priceless habitat for caribou, birds and other wildlife,” said center attorney Deirdre McDonnell in an announcement of the lawsuit filed in Anchorage.

The lawsuit is the second challenging the permit. Nonprofit law firm Trustees for Alaska, representing seven residents of Nuiqsut, the only village within the reserve, sued the Corps in February, claiming petroleum development on the Colville River Delta harms their subsistence life of hunting and fishing.

Messages left for Corps spokesman Curt Biberdorf were not immediately returned.

The reserve was created by President Warren Harding in 1923 and covers 23 million acres, an area slightly smaller than Indiana.

The Center for Biological Diversity lawsuit said the permit allows ConocoPhillips to build an access road to existing infrastructure with four river crossings including a 1,400-foot span across the Colville, the country’s largest Arctic river. Besides vehicles, the bridge would support a pipeline to move crude oil to processing facilities.

A spill into the river would put oil into the Beaufort Sea, which could harm endangered bowhead whales and threatened polar bears, McDonnell said.

The Corps reversed an earlier decision that would have required a pipeline buried beneath the river. The petroleum industry could have avoided roads and minimized effects on the area, McDonnell said, but instead picked the cheapest method for reaching drilling sites.

The lawsuit claims the Corps granted the permit by relying on a nine-year-old environmental review conducted before ConocoPhillips made its current access proposal. The lawsuit claims the Corps did not consider impacts on whales and seal species and did not require the least environmentally damaging, practical alternative