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US Court Halts Drilling at ConocoPhillips Project in Alaska

A federal appeals court has sided with conservation and Indigenous groups by ordering work to stop at a major oil project on Alaska's North Slope.

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ANCHORAGE, ALASKA (AP) — A federal appeals court ordered work to stop at a major oil project on Alaska's North Slope, siding with conservation and Indigenous groups.

The decision Saturday by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals will stop on-the-ground work for the winter at the Willow project operated by ConocoPhillips Co., the Anchorage Daily News reported Sunday.

Ice roads support wintertime work at projects on Alaska's North Slope, but they melt in the spring and that drastically reduces what can be done for all but a handful of months.

The Willow project in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska was expected to provide jobs for about 120 people this year.

Sovereign Inupiat for a Living Arctic, the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of the Earth and other groups sued last fall to stop the project altogether, not just in winter. They argue that the Trump administration didn't follow environmental laws before approving the project.

This month, the groups asked the 9th Circuit to overturn a U.S. District Court decision to allow winter work to continue. After the groups appealed, short-term work was halted.

Ninth Circuit Judges William Canby and Michelle Friedland agreed that the plaintiffs would be harmed without an injunction that stops the work until the court can rule on the case itself.

ConocoPhillips spokeswoman Natalie Lowman didn't say in an email Sunday whether the company plans to appeal the work stoppage.

ConocoPhillips is expected to decide later this year if it will pay billions of dollars to develop Willow for oil production, with the first oil not expected to flow until the mid-2020s.

Siqiniq Maupin, executive director of Sovereign Inupiat for a Living Arctic, said in a statement that "Arctic Slope communities have suffered health issues and the loss of traditional practices and food sources because of oil extraction."

"Decision makers and decision-making processes that impact the Arctic Slope must not just claim to include or consider us, but in fact prioritize our health and well-being," Maupin said.

Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska program director for Defenders of Wildlife, said the project threatens people and wildlife in the Southern Beaufort Sea region.

"The Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else in the world," Whittington-Evans said. "Moving forward with this fossil fuel project would be at the great expense of wildlife and communities."

Republican state Sen. Josh Revak, chairman of the Senate Resources Committee, said in a statement that the order was a "body blow" to struggling Alaska residents.

"In the Willow project lies the hope of hundreds of millions of barrels of oil in the pipeline and thousands of good-paying jobs for decades — all developed using the strictest environmental standards on the planet," Revak said.