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Salazar signs sweeping plan for Alaska reserve, confirms potential pipeline

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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar today finalized a plan to greatly expand protections for wildlife in a 23-million-acre federal reserve in northwest Alaska, drawing immediate applause from conservation groups.

The **record of decision** also provides "explicit confirmation" that a pipeline could be built and requires the Bureau of Land Management to establish a formal working group to ensure management decisions are informed by the needs of Alaska Natives, Interior said.

The integrated activity plan, which is the first to cover the entire National Petroleum Reserve, known as NPR-A, would reduce access to oil and gas from 13 million acres to 11.8 million acres, allowing exploration of about 72 percent of the economically recoverable oil, or 549 million barrels.

It also expands "special areas" -- places with significant subsistence, recreational, fish and wildlife, historical or scenic value that Congress required BLM to protect -- from 8.3 million acres to 13.35 million acres.

"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 this afternoon in a statement.

The plan appears largely unchanged from the preferred alternative the agency announced in December ([*Greenwire*](#), Dec. 20, 2012).

The new working group of Alaska Natives and local governments will help inform management activities and future development in the reserve, including oil and gas and pipeline developments, Interior said. It seeks to leverage scientific and traditional knowledge about wildlife populations to inform potential adjustments to special areas, including the southernmost boundary of Teshekpuk Lake.

The plan expands the Teshekpuk Lake special area from 1.75 million acres to 3.65 million acres -- barring oil and gas leasing on about 3.1 million of those acres -- to protect habitat for birds from all seven continents.

The plan also creates a new Peard Bay special area, enlarges the Utukok River Uplands special area and protects caribous that feed more than 40 villages in northwest Alaska, Interior said.

"We strongly endorse the plan as a victory for birds, wildlife and America's future," said Audubon President David Yarnold. "It says that some places really are too precious to drill, and there's no better example than the Teshekpuk Lake area, one of the planet's most prolific bird factories."

But Interior argued the plan will also bolster access for oil and gas development, even though it is likely to be opposed by industry.

The plan makes the entire Chukchi Sea coast and most of the Beaufort Sea coast available for potential pipeline routes to transport crude from the Arctic Ocean to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Royal Dutch Shell PLC and other major oil companies hold billions of dollars of leases in the Arctic but would be hard-pressed to economically develop them without a land-based conduit to market.

The reserve also contains 191 oil and gas leases covering 1.5 million acres, though few areas will be developed without adequate infrastructure.

House Natural Resources Chairman Doc Hastings (R-Wash.) criticized the plan, saying the administration is "locking up a majority" of the reserve, which Congress "specifically established for oil and natural gas production."

"Only in President Obama's backwards worldview of anti-energy policies does it make sense to prohibit energy production in a place specifically set aside for energy production at a time when gasoline prices are skyrocketing and federal oil and natural gas production is declining," Hastings said in a statement.

But Jamie Williams, president of the Wilderness Society, today called the final plan for NPR-A "fair and thoughtful" for balancing the needs of Alaska Natives, energy independence and wildlife conservation.

"This strategy protects incredibly valuable wildlife habitat for caribou, bears and migratory waterfowl in the Western Arctic, yet still allows industry access to the majority of economically recoverable oil in the reserve," he said in a statement. "It's a plan that meets the needs of all Americans, and can serve as a model for the rest of the country."

Earlier iterations of the plan drew mixed reactions from Alaska Natives, who hunt wildlife in the reserve but also stand to benefit from energy development. Some Native leaders last October traveled to Washington to lobby Interior for wildlife protections, but the Native-owned Arctic Slope Regional Corp., which provides services to the oil industry, last fall blasted the plan (*E&ENews PM*, Oct. 23, 2012).

Salazar's decision comes months after he instructed BLM and Interior officials to engage in additional outreach with Alaska Natives to discuss future pipelines, leasing boundaries and subsistence issues before he signed the record of decision.

Sen. Mark Begich (D-Alaska) said that he is pleased with language confirming the potential construction of a pipeline but that, on balance, the plan seems to ignore the will of Alaskans.

"Despite their claims, it is clear the Interior Department yet again has made a decision about Alaska land use that ignores what Alaskans want," Begich said. "I appreciate the strong and clear language on future pipeline routes through the NPR-A to carry Beaufort and Chukchi oil. But I am left wondering what good a working group will do if they haven't been doing a good job of listening so far. As Elvis Presley said, we need 'a little less conversation and a little more action.'"