

## Dispelling the 2,000-acre footprint myth for Arctic National Wildlife Refuge development

Six decades of biological study and scientific research have confirmed that the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge merits permanent safeguards and precautionary management. The coastal plain within the refuge is a narrow (15–40 mi) land area between the towering Brooks Range and the icy Beaufort Sea. This unique compression of habitats concentrates the occurrence of a wide variety of species, including polar bears, grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines, caribou, muskoxen, Dolly Varden, Arctic grayling, snow geese, and more than 130 species of migratory birds. In fact, according to the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the Arctic Refuge coastal plain contains the greatest wildlife diversity of any protected area above the Arctic Circle.

### WHY DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

Oil exploration and development have substantially changed environments where they have occurred in Alaska's central Arctic. Since the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968, the National Research Council (2003) estimated that the development affects a land area of about 1,000 square miles, and

is one of the world's largest industrial complexes. Oil spills, contaminated waste, and light, noise, and other sources of pollution have had measurable impacts on this environment. Roads, pipelines, well pads, processing facilities, and other support infrastructure have incrementally altered the character of this ecosystem.

### THE 1002 AREA

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was established in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. In section 1002 of that act, Congress deferred management of the 1.5-million-acre coastal plain for future administrations. With an act of Congress, the "1002 Area" can be opened for oil and gas development. For the last four decades, an intense battle has been fought over keeping the Refuge intact. Drilling proponents often use deceptive language about the true footprint and impact of drilling in the Refuge, citing a development extent of only 2,000 acres.



**THE 2,000-ACRE FOOTPRINT MYTH**

Language in the latest bill would cap oilfield development at 2,000 acres. However, this figure is highly misleading. The 2,000 acres does not include gravel mines, roads, or pipelines (except for the footprint of the posts holding the pipeline in the air).

Most importantly, this would not be one isolated developed place but instead a sprawling network of well pads, processing facilities, airstrips, utility lines, gravel mines, and landfills. The 2,000 acres also does not cover seismic or other exploration operations, nor does it account for light, air, and noise pollution, which are carried far from development.

The language allows for development to sprawl throughout the entire 1.5 million acres of the 1002 Area, a region about the size of the state of Delaware.

**WILDLIFE AT RISK**

The Refuge's coastal plain is the most important land denning area for polar bears in Alaska. It is home to 200,000 caribou of the Porcupine Herd which are a vital subsistence resource for the Gwich'in people of the region.

The coastal plain is a globally significant Important Bird Area with nearly a quarter million shorebirds nesting each year. Over 300,000 snow geese have been recorded staging in the Refuge. Birds from the Refuge are known to disperse to 13 different global flyways, including all four major flyways in North America.

**THE BOTTOM LINE**



Drilling proponents claim the bill would open only 2,000 acres to the oil corporations, but in reality the entire 1.5-million-acre 1002 Area would be subject to leasing and exploration.

According to the US Geological Survey, whatever oil is under the coastal plain is in small deposits spread throughout the plain. Even if directional drilling were used to access oil from this vast area, expansive, sprawling networks of pipelines and roads would be built, fragmenting wildlife habitat.

The proposed 2,000 acres of development would fundamentally — and permanently — impact this timeless and wild landscape and the birds, caribou, polar bears, and other incredible wildlife that depend on it.

Photo: David Shaw

*This map shows a speculative scenario of how development could span the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. Up to 2,000 acres of well pads, airstrips, and other infrastructure are shown in context with connecting roads, pipelines, and gravel mines not subject to the 2,000-acre cap.*

