

Directional Drilling: The Latest Scheme to Develop the Arctic Refuge

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a national treasure, and its protection has long been a high priority for the American people. The Refuge's Coastal Plain sustains hundreds of species of wildlife, as well as the traditional way of life of the Gwich'in people.

Senator Lisa Murkowski's legislation **S. 351**, the 'No Surface Occupancy Western Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act,' is just another scheme to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to risky and dangerous oil and gas development.



S. 351 would waive vital environmental laws and erase the very values for which the Refuge was originally set aside 50 years ago – to protect “its unique wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values.” The bill contains so many loopholes and exaggerated claims that it is hard to see this legislation as anything more than a Trojan horse aimed at opening the entire Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain to oil leasing, exploration and development.

Some Truths about Sen. Murkowski's Dangerous Directional Drilling Bill

Impacts:

- * S. 351 would allow oil exploration activities, including seismic testing and exploratory oil well drilling, within the Arctic Refuge's sensitive 1.5-million-acre Coastal Plain, damaging habitat for threatened polar bears, caribou and millions of birds from around the globe.
- * This bill promotes increased development along the Arctic Refuge's Canning River border and nearly 100 miles of the Refuge coastline. Impacts of noisy development and potential spills would inevitably extend into key wildlife, wilderness, and subsistence areas.
- * Directional drilling will result in spills and pollution just like conventional drilling.
- * The oil industry has a poor track record on Alaska's North Slope: on average, 453 spills occur there annually and more than 2.7 million gallons of toxic substances have been spilled since 1996.
- * Impacts of any drilling extend far beyond the actual well pad, and directional drilling does not equal a “smaller footprint.” It still includes infrastructure such as production sites, airports, road and pipelines.

Drilling long distances:

- * Despite Sen. Murkowski's claims that oil in the Refuge would be accessed using directional drilling eight miles underground, this has never been done before. Currently on Alaska's North Slope, only one well -- out of 5549 drilled -- was directionally drilled 4 miles or more horizontally from the rig, only 2% reached > 3 miles (41 wells), and 94% of all wells extended < than 2 miles from the drill rig.
- * BP has called their unfinished Liberty project in Alaska, which aims to drill 6-8 miles horizontally, their “most technically challenging development to date.” The Liberty project is the longest extended-reach well ever attempted and has hit delays due to engineering problems and safety issues.
- * S. 351 is nothing more than a means for opening the Arctic Refuge to any and all kinds of oil and gas development. As Senator Murkowski herself said, this is “legislation that will allow oil from [the Arctic Refuge] to be developed **initially** using only directional drilling techniques.” (emphasis added)

Oil in the Refuge:

- * USGS predicts oil deposits are likely to be scattered in small pockets across the Coastal Plain and while Sen. Murkowski has claimed directional drilling would access “10 percent of the refuge's estimated oil,” data has not been provided to back up this claim.
- * Changes in conservation policy and practices from the past few years have already set our nation on track to reduce oil consumption between now and 2030 by 17 times the amount of oil speculated to be in the Refuge.

For more information: Pam Miller, Northern Alaska Environmental Center at 907-452-5021 or pam@northern.org