

Search



**PLANET IN PERIL**  A CNN WORLDWIDE INVESTIGATION  
**TONIGHT & TOMORROW 9 PM ET/PT**   
[EXPLORE THE ISSUES](#)

# Political Conflict Is Renewed Over Drilling in Arctic Refuge

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES  
Published: September 5, 1990

**LEAD:** The coastal plain of this vast wilderness area is home to a few hundred Eskimos, herds of caribou and musk oxen, vegetation hardy enough to survive the harsh Arctic climate - and what may be the largest untapped oil reserve in the United States.

PRINT

SINGLE-PAGE

SAVE

SHARE

This kind of debate is not limited to Alaska. The Government has said it will try to mediate a dispute in Santa Barbara, Calif., over transporting crude oil. And oil industry executives are pushing, with no apparent success, for a reconsideration of President Bush's decision in June to bar new drilling off the coasts of California, Florida and other states.

But nowhere is the debate taking as sharp a focus as in this pristine, desolate region 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

"We are the nation's wilderness and we are also the nation's major source of energy," said Alaska's Governor, Steve Cowper, a Democrat who favors drilling in the refuge. "This is a metaphor for the energy debate."

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge covers 19 million acres in the northeastern corner of Alaska, an area almost the size of Maine. It is a landscape virtually untouched by man in a state whose majestic wilderness, especially after the Exxon Valdez spill, is a powerful symbol of what is at risk when oil production or transportation go wrong.

The drilling debate centers on the section of the refuge that runs along the Beaufort Sea at the eastern end of the North Slope. The coastal plain, covering 1.5 million acres, or an area the size of Delaware, is a flat, virtually featureless tundra near the water, with gently rolling hills a few miles inland. It is 65 miles east of the Prudhoe Bay oilfield and the other fields of Alaska's North Slope.

The Eskimo village of Kaktovik, which like many settlements above the Arctic Circle has a satellite dish to receive television signals but is without running water, lies just outside the boundary of the refuge at the edge of the Beaufort Sea. But there are no roads within or leading to the refuge. Only a few hundred outsiders, including oil-company employees and tourists, fly into the coastal plain each year. Barren Desert or Sacred Place? The trade-offs among energy, environment and economy are clearly delineated here. To Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, the coastal plain of the refuge is "nothing but a frozen, barren desert" containing oil that would contribute to national security by adding to domestic reserves.

To Representative Morris K. Udall, the Arizona Democrat who is a leading opponent of

## Afternoon Update



Sign up for a recap of the day's top stories and business headlines, sent weekday afternoons.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

The New York Times

INTRODUCING

**My Times**

Create your own page with your favorite sources of information.

[Get Started >](#)

## MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. An Active, Purposeful Machine That Comes Out at Night to Play
2. Five Easy Ways to Go Organic
3. The Elderly Always Sleep Worse, and Other Myths of Aging
4. Well: Shhh...My Child Is Sleeping (in My Bed, Um, With Me)
5. One Person's Trash Is Another Person's Lost Masterpiece
6. Basics: In the Dreamscape of Nightmares, Clues to Why We Dream at All
7. Rockies Place Their Faith in God, and One Another
8. New to Being Dry, the South Struggles to Adapt
9. Drug-Resistant Staph: What You Need to Know
10. The Future Is Drying Up

[Go to Complete List >](#)

The New York Times

HEALTH

[nytimes.com/health](http://nytimes.com/health)



drilling, the area is "a sacred place" that should never be given over to oil rigs and pipelines.

To Archie Brower, a village leader in Kaktovik, oil development here means jobs to keep young people from leaving and money to prop up a local economy that is as fragile as the local ecosystem.

To Karen Jettmar, the assistant director of the Wilderness Society in Alaska, the refuge is "a little island of protection in a sea of oil development."

#### Amount of Oil Highly Uncertain

In 1987, after a five-year study, the Interior Department called the coastal plain of the refuge "the nation's best single opportunity to increase significantly domestic oil production." While no one will know for certain whether there is any recoverable oil at all unless exploratory drilling is permitted, Government and industry estimates of the amount of oil in the region are as high as nine billion barrels, nearly as much as was in the Prudhoe Bay field before the pipeline opened in 1977.

The nine-billion-barrel figure, however, is by all accounts optimistic. The Interior Department study said the average of all estimates it had considered was 3.2 billion barrels.

In the eyes of the oil industry and its supporters, drilling in the refuge is particularly important now because production in the North Slope fields peaked last year at just under two million barrels a day, or about a quarter of all domestically produced oil and about an eighth of all oil consumed in the United States, and is expected to decline to less than half that within a decade. It would take at least six years to begin producing oil from the wildlife refuge.

#### Called a Turnpike in a Park

Oil-industry executives say that drilling in the refuge can be done in an environmentally sensitive way. Environmentalists contend that there are risks to wildlife, particularly the migrating caribou, and that no one yet knows the long-term effects of industrial development on the tundra. There is always the risk of a major spill from a pipeline or a production plant.

Moreover, environmentalists say that allowing oil development in the refuge is the equivalent of placing a stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike in a national park. No matter how carefully it is done, it will carry too high an esthetic price.

1 | 2 | [NEXT PAGE >](#)



#### What is the body's role in Diabetes?

Also in Health:

[Everything you need to know about diabetes](#)

[What causes an asthma attack?](#)

[Do you suffer from arthritis?](#)

Ads by Google

what's this?

#### **Scotiabank Giller Prize**

Win A Grand Prize Trip If You Guess The  
Scotiabank Giller Prize Winner

[www.guessthegiller.ca](http://www.guessthegiller.ca)