



Arctic Oil and Gas Development

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Abstract — Oil and gas development in Alaska's Arctic region presents complex environmental and social challenges. This policy brief examines the history of Arctic energy development, recent changes to federal oil and gas regulations, and the consequences for ecosystems and communities inhabiting Alaska. It explores policy options for balancing energy development while protecting environmental and subsistence rights.

Keywords — Arctic oil and gas development; environmental regulation; Alaska Native communities; subsistence rights; climate change; environmental protection

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief examines the history and regulation of oil and gas development in Alaska's Arctic region, with particular attention to the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), and offshore drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. Federal policies governing Arctic energy development have changed over time, reflecting competing priorities related to domestic energy production and rights of Alaska Native communities.

Recent regulatory proposals and policy changes have raised concerns about the potential effects of expanded oil and gas development on Arctic ecosystems and subsistence activities. This brief analyzes these developments and considers policy options for strengthening environmental oversight, protecting subsistence resources, and ensuring affected communities have the

opportunity to participate in federal decision making.

II. OVERVIEW

Oil exploration in Alaska's Arctic region predates modern large-scale production, with federal exploration of the North Slope beginning in the early twentieth century. The NPR-A was established in 1923 as a potential source of petroleum for national energy needs, and the first state lease sale in the North Slope occurred in 1964. Large-scale commercial development accelerated after the discovery of the Prudhoe Bay oil field in 1968. The discovery transformed the North Slope economy and led to the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System, which began transporting North Slope oil in 1977.

Federal regulation became focused on the risks of Arctic drilling. In July 2016, the Department of the Interior finalized the Arctic Exploratory Drilling Rule, which applied specifically to exploratory drilling from floating vessels in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. The rule was developed in response to the technical and logistical challenges of operating in a region characterized by extreme weather, sea ice, and geographic isolation.

The 2016 rule established several additional safety and environmental requirements. Operators were required to prepare an Integrated Operations Plan addressing all phases of an Arctic exploration program and to maintain access to source-control and containment equipment including capping stacks and cap and flow system. These requirements were intended to address the difficulty of responding to an emergency in a remote environment where conventional response infrastructure may be unavailable.

Since 2016, federal Arctic oil and gas policy has changed substantially. In 2026, the Department of the Interior proposed revisions to the rule that would provide operators with additional compliance options and remove the separated Integrated Operations Plan requirement while retaining Arctic specific provisions concerning well control and oil spill response. The proposal does not authorize new drilling and would continue to subject proposed operations to environmental exploration plans.

Onshore regulation has undergone a separate series of changes in the NPR-A. The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) 2024 rule expanded protections for wildlife habitat and subsistence resources, but the Department of the Interior rescinded that rule in November 2025. In 2026, BLM began a new rulemaking process intended to streamline permitting for qualifying oil and gas production sites and association rights of way in the NPR-A.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

Reducing or modifying regulatory requirements in the Arctic could create several environmental and social concerns. Weaker regulations may increase the risk of oil spills, pollution, habitat destruction, and damage to fragile Arctic ecosystems. Expanded oil and gas development could also contribute to climate change and reduce environmental oversight and

accountability. These changes may also disrupt the traditional livelihoods of Alaska Native communities, particularly activities such as hunting and fishing that depend on healthy ecosystems.

Alaska Native communities and subsistence interests should therefore be meaningfully included in federal decision-making. Federal agencies should consult affected communities before making regulatory changes and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and traditional ecological practices into environmental assessments. Decision-makers should also consider the environmental, cultural, and economic impacts on local communities and protect subsistence hunting, fishing, and food security. This process should follow relevant requirements under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), including applicable subsistence impact assessments and protections.

IV. POLICY OPTIONS

The BLM proposal to remove project-to-project environmental reviews for Arctic drilling projects is still in the proposal stage and has not been fully implemented. This means a 60-day public comment period, which started September 6th, is still underway, during which citizens, scientists, and lobbying groups can submit feedback on the proposal. Under federal law, agencies must respond to comments by incorporating them into the final version of the proposed law. These revisions and delays are likely, as multiple interest groups have raised significant objections. For instance, Indigenous communities in the Arctic have said BLM has a responsibility and obligation to conduct more extensive assessments of these proposals and that its assessment of how projects will impact wildlife, food systems, etc., should be reinstated.

Congressional Democrats have already submitted a formal inquiry into the Department of the Interior (DOI) over its fast-tracked legislation aimed at stripping environmental protections and expediting drilling procedures in the Arctic region. They believe these actions represent a conflict of interest, as the department pursued this industry-written proposal days after receiving its petition. To learn more about this potential conflict of interest, they are demanding access to the Department's records for transparency and accountability.

These new developments may trigger several legal challenges. One concern is the use of vibroseis trucks for seismic surveys, instead of conducting case-by-case individual environmental evaluations, which can disrupt caribou migration routes, damage tundra permafrost, and threaten polar bear dens. These impacts conflict with the requirements of the Category Exclusion, a fast-track mechanism that allows federal actions to bypass two main NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) review steps: Environmental Reviews and Environmental Impact Statements. Category Exclusions are intended for actions that do not lead to negative environmental consequences, which is not the case here due to the potential ecological impacts above. Another concern is that Category Exclusions usually include a 30-day public comment period, but the Council of Environmental Quality streamlined the process and removed it. This is problematic considering the potential of large-scale energy projects being pursued in what is deemed an environmentally sensitive area. Environmental Groups are already planning to challenge this through legal channels.

V. IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Oil and gas development in Alaska's Arctic can affect communities throughout the north slope, particularly communities located near the

NPR-A, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and areas of existing or proposed infrastructure. More than forty indigenous communities rely on resources within the NPR-A for subsistence. This includes a wide variety of caribou, fish, shorebirds, waterfowl, and other wildlife. Communities therefore may experience effects from development through changes in employment and economic activity and exacerbated effects of changes to the access of land, wildlife habitats, and transportation routes.

For Alaska native communities this is quite closely tied to food security and cultural persistence. Under Title VIII of ANILCA, subsistence uses of fish and wildlife on federal public lands receive priority, reflecting Congress's acknowledgement of subsistence as an important component of the physical, cultural, economic, and social wellbeing of rural Alaskans. The federal subsistence framework recognizes that such hunting and fishing activities are economic activities and also transmit knowledge and culture between generations. Oil and gas infrastructure would affect these activities by altering wildlife habitat while changing access to traditional hunting and fishing areas. Federal analyses have demonstrated the scale at which development related infrastructure can affect subsistence. Arctic ecosystems are also particularly sensitive to disturbances because of their cold climate, limited infrastructure, and slow ecological recovery processes. Climate change already has been affecting this region, causing changes in wildlife habitat and permafrost. Further development may therefore interact with environmental changes that are already affecting the resources upon which Arctic communities, both human and animal, depend upon.

Furthermore, these impacts will have implications for future generations. Such changes can affect the ability of younger generations to continue

subsistence practices and maintain connections to ecological knowledge.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Arctic oil and gas development presents significant policy challenges involving energy production and the rights and livelihoods of Alaska Native communities. Changes to federal regulations may affect the level of environmental review required for development projects, protection of wildlife habitats, and the ability of communities to maintain traditional subsistence practices.

A balanced policy approach should incorporate consultation with Alaska native communities and safeguard for subsistence resources and Arctic ecosystems. Federal agencies should ensure that regulatory decisions account for both the potential economic benefits and its environmental and social consequences. Strengthening transparency can help ensure future Arctic energy policies address the interest of affected communities while considering the long term environmental sustainability.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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