

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Oversight Hearing on

Promoting Onshore Oil and Gas Development in Alaska

July 18, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here, particularly since many of you travelled a very long way to be here today.

Oil and gas development in Alaska is not an easy issue to grapple with. It is also not an easy thing to actually do.

The North Slope of Alaska is one of the most remote corners of this nation, with the only car or truck access being one lonely 400-mile gravel road.

Most of the region, which is larger than the State of Minnesota but has only 9,000 residents, is accessible only by airplane.

It is unbelievably vast and for many of us in the Lower 48, unbelievably wild.

For months there is no sunshine and temperatures plunge well below zero.

In the summer, an amazing array of animals populate the lakes and the tundra of the North Slope – caribou, migratory birds, bears, wolves, and many more.

The native people who have lived there for millennia depend on these animals for their food and for their culture.

But despite the sense of rugged wilderness, the region is also tremendously fragile.

The climate is changing faster in the Arctic than anywhere else in the world, and the impacts are dramatic.

The loss of sea ice is well known. The two smallest Arctic ice caps ever recorded occurred in the past five years, and this year could easily be the smallest yet.

Less ice means a less-protected coastline, more vulnerable to waves and storms that erode the land at a tremendous rate.

Warmer temperatures lead to melting permafrost, invasive species, changed migration patterns, and fires – and these are all being seen, not simply predicted for far in the future.

And in the middle of this wild, fragile, and rapidly changing environment is one of the largest oil fields in North America.

We have already sacrificed the area around Prudhoe Bay to our nearly insatiable thirst for oil. A network of drill pads, roads, and pipelines crisscrosses the tundra for over 100 miles, and it is still growing.

Much of this development has occurred on state and tribal land. The Obama Administration gave the green-light to the first commercial development on federal land.

But it also acknowledged that there have to be limits. There has to be balance – a balance between development and conservation. There may be areas appropriate for drilling. But there are also areas that must be protected, particularly in an area like the Arctic.

The Obama Administration's 2013 integrated management plan for the N-P-R-A reflects that vision of balance. Over half of the Reserve, containing an estimated three-quarters of the economically recoverable oil, is made available for development.

And slightly less than half of the Reserve is protected, including the vital area around Teshekpuk (te-SHEK-pook) Lake, which is a critical calving area for the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd, and home to numerous species of birds during the summer months, including raptors, waterfowl, and shorebirds that migrate from as far as South America.

Unfortunately, the Trump Administration, in its quest for energy dominance, appears eager to upset this balance and open the entire North Slope to unfettered development.

Not only is the four-year-old management plan for the N-P-R-A going to be rewritten, but the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is also at risk.

The coastal plain is often called the biological heart of the Refuge, providing essential habitat for polar bears, the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and over 250 species of birds.

The irreversible damage we could inflict on this area by drilling on it is disproportionately high compared to the amount of oil we could possibly extract.

It simply isn't worth it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the balance of my time.