

Chairman Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing:

The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain
March 26, 2019

The Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources will come to order.

The Subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on the prospect of oil and gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and on H.R. 1146, Mr. Huffman's Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act – and I am proud to be one of the 115 cosponsors of that legislation.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member or their designees.

I ask unanimous consent that all other Members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted to the Subcommittee Clerk by 5:00 pm today. [*pause*] Hearing no objection, so ordered.

I would first like to welcome all of our witnesses, particularly those from Alaska and the Yukon, who have travelled a great distance to be here so that their voices could be heard at this hearing today.

The question about how to approach the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been going on for decades.

For the oil and gas industry, it is a promising cash cow, with billions of dollars of oil just waiting to be sold.

But for others, such as myself and the majority of Americans, it is a fragile ecosystem with exceptional wilderness values that is considered the biological heart of the Arctic Refuge.

A place that the Fish and Wildlife Service has said is, quote, the most biologically productive part of the Arctic Refuge for wildlife, home to polar bears, caribou, hundreds of species of migratory birds, and countless other species.

And for the Gwich'in people, it is simply sacrosanct. They call it "the sacred place where life begins." A number of their leaders are here today to tell us more about the importance of the coastal plain to their history and their way of life.

I think we should all be able to agree that decisions about the future of the Arctic Refuge should be made thoughtfully, carefully, and with an understanding that this is a one-way street.

Oil and gas development, particularly on the tundra in the Arctic, is irreversible. We only need to look at the development to the west of the Coastal Plain to see the incredible impacts that are caused by oil and gas development, where exploration from the 80's left scars that can still be seen today. The impacts of any new development in the area would be there for millennia.

Because of the exceptional character of the area and its importance to Alaska Natives and Canadian First Nations, it was protected by bi-partisan efforts for decades.

But the way the coastal plain was forced open in the 2017 tax bill was not thoughtful. In fact, it was barely even thought of.

This unrelated provision stuck onto a tax cut for billionaires on the questionable rationale that it would help offset the cost.

In fact, it's the only way Congressional Republicans tried to pay for their tax bill at all. But destroying a wilderness to get a one billion dollar offset to a one point five trillion dollar tax bill is clearly not about fiscal responsibility.

It was simply about getting this through the Senate with only 50 votes. With no vote on protecting the Refuge allowed on the House Floor. No debate allowed at all, as a matter of fact.

And all this time we have never heard the proponents of drilling on the Arctic Refuge explain: why now?

Even the oil and gas industry and conservative think tanks didn't call for opening the Refuge in their energy recommendations to the incoming Trump administration.

We're producing record levels of oil in this country. The biggest problem for the oil and gas industry isn't trying to find enough places to drill.

It's getting enough pipelines and dock space to be able to export even more than the three million barrels a day that we are currently shipping overseas.

An economic analysis done for the attorneys general of 15 states and the District of Columbia found that any oil produced from the coastal plain would not be used in the United States.

Rather, it would be sold into international markets.

So, we should destroy a great American wilderness that is sacred to indigenous peoples so that ConocoPhillips or BP or ExxonMobil can sell more oil to China, India, and Japan?

There is absolutely no need to open the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas drilling.

It's as if Congressional Republicans were so out of new energy ideas, they had no choice but to recycle theirs from 15 years ago, whether it made sense now or not.

I will tell you that it doesn't make sense, and we should protect the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain, not hand it over to the highest corporate bidder.

With that, I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses, and I now recognize Ranking Member Gosar for his opening statement.