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Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Status of Oil and Gas Program

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR or the Refuge) comprises 19 million acres in northeast Alaska, administered primarily by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in the Department of the Interior (DOI). ANWR’s Coastal Plain—a 1.57-million-acre area in the northern part of the Refuge (**Figure 1**)—is viewed as an onshore oil prospect, with a mean estimate by the U.S. Geological Survey of 7.7 billion barrels of technically recoverable oil on federal lands (or 10.4 billion barrels if Alaska Native lands and adjacent waters are included). The Refuge also is a center of activity for caribou and other wildlife, with subsistence use by Alaska Natives and critical habitat for polar bears under the Endangered Species Act (ESA; 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544).

P.L. 115-97 established a program for oil and gas leasing in ANWR’s Coastal Plain. The law’s 2017 enactment marked a turning point in decades of congressional debate over energy development in the Refuge. Prior to enactment of the law, Section 1003 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA; P.L. 96-487) had prohibited oil and gas development in ANWR unless such activities were explicitly authorized by an act of Congress. Section 20001 of P.L. 115-97 directed the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), to establish and administer a competitive oil and gas leasing program for ANWR’s Coastal Plain and added this program as a stated purpose of the Refuge. The law requires at least two lease sales in the Coastal Plain, one

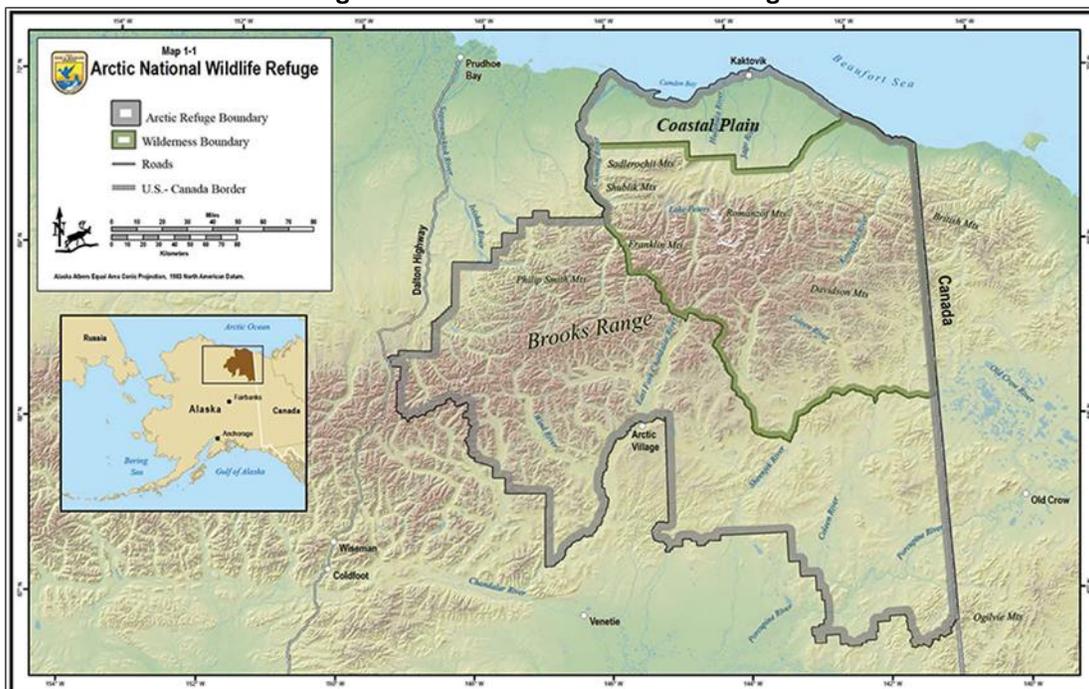
within four years of the law’s enactment (i.e., by December 2021) and a second within seven years of enactment (December 2024). Each lease sale must offer at least 400,000 acres and must include those areas with the highest potential for discovery of hydrocarbons. The law also has provisions concerning management of the oil and gas program, minimum royalty rates for ANWR leases, disposition of revenues from the program, rights-of-way, and surface development. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10782, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) Oil and Gas Program: Provisions in P.L. 115-97, Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.*)

During BLM’s implementation of the ANWR oil and gas program, Congress has continued to debate leasing in the Refuge. Some Members support the program established in P.L. 115-97 and others seek to repeal it.

January 2021 Lease Sale

On January 6, 2021, under the Trump Administration, BLM held the first oil and gas lease sale for the ANWR Coastal Plain, offering 22 tracts on 1.1 million acres. The sale yielded a total of \$14.4 million in high bids on 11 tracts. BLM subsequently issued leases for nine of the tracts, covering 437,804 total acres. Seven leases went to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA), a state-established public corporation. Two private companies that won leases later relinquished them.

Figure 1. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge



Source: FWS, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan*, April 2015. Edited by CRS.

Temporary Moratorium and Environmental Review

On January 20, 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13990, directing the Secretary of the Interior to “place a temporary moratorium on all activities of the Federal Government relating to the implementation of the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program” and to conduct a “new, comprehensive analysis” of the program’s potential environmental impacts in a manner consistent with applicable law. Pursuant to the executive order, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland issued Secretarial Order 3401 on June 1, 2021, with similar requirements. BLM suspended operations on the awarded leases while a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) was prepared under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 42 U.S.C. §§4321 et seq.) to reevaluate impacts of the leasing program.

Second Coastal Plain Lease Sale

On December 9, 2024, BLM released a record of decision on the final SEIS and announced the second Coastal Plain lease sale, which is scheduled to take place on January 10, 2025. BLM is mandating stricter environmental protections and less acreage for the second ANWR lease sale than were offered for the first sale. BLM’s chosen alternative from the SEIS offers for leasing the minimum allowable acreage under P.L. 115-97 (400,000 acres), with approximately 80% of the acreage subject to restrictions on surface occupancy and/or timing limitations. Some legislative proposals would direct that, rather than the SEIS, the second lease sale should be conducted in accordance with an earlier record of decision from the Trump Administration, which made available approximately 1.5 million acres—the entire Coastal Plain program area—for leasing for the 2021 sale (although later changes resulted in 1.1 million acres ultimately offered at that sale). The earlier record of decision identified more than 60% of the acreage as subject to surface occupancy and/or timing restrictions.

Lease Cancellations

Separately, on September 6, 2023, DOI announced the Secretary of the Interior’s decision to cancel the ANWR leases from the 2021 lease sale (the seven leases held by AIDEA). According to a DOI press release, the Secretary determined that the earlier NEPA analysis underlying that lease sale was “seriously flawed” and “based on ... fundamental legal deficiencies,” such as failure to analyze a reasonable range of alternatives, to “properly quantify” downstream greenhouse gas emissions, and to “properly interpret” certain provisions of P.L. 115-97. AIDEA has challenged the Secretary’s decision in court, and the State of Alaska has sued for revenues it alleges the state would have received had the leases not been canceled. BLM stated that the area to be offered for the second lease sale overlaps the area of the canceled leases.

Alaska Native Lands in the Coastal Plain

Some lands within the boundary of the Coastal Plain are owned by Alaska Native corporations. A 1983 agreement, known as the Chandler Lake Agreement, provided that oil

and gas development would not take place on these Alaska Native lands until Congress approved development of the Coastal Plain. P.L. 115-97 thus opened the possibility of oil and gas development on both the federal lands and the Alaska Native lands of the Coastal Plain. Alaska Native corporations applied for permits to conduct seismic exploration on their Coastal Plain lands, but BLM and FWS did not approve all the necessary permits.

Issues for Congress

The conflict between oil and natural gas potential and valued natural habitat in the Refuge has long created dilemmas for Congress when considering activities on the ANWR Coastal Plain. Broader questions about U.S. energy and climate also have shaped the debate. Supporters of oil and gas leasing assert that development of the Coastal Plain would increase American energy security and could replace energy developed overseas with fewer environmental safeguards than apply to the Refuge. Supporters also point to potential economic benefits for the Refuge’s Alaska Native communities and for the state of Alaska generally. Opponents contend that ANWR leasing would irretrievably damage wildlife habitat and Alaska Native subsistence uses and, more broadly, that it represents a long-term investment in fossil fuels that would slow efforts to address climate change. For further discussion, see CRS Report RL33872, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR): An Overview*.

The status of the oil and gas leasing program on the ANWR Coastal Plain may continue to be of interest to Congress. Congress may consider whether to require additional lease sales beyond the two sales required in P.L. 115-97, whether to prohibit further leasing, or whether to allow DOI to make future leasing decisions under existing authorities. Some previously introduced legislation would facilitate oil and gas development by directing BLM to reissue the canceled Coastal Plain leases, restricting future lease cancellations, directing that any presidential or secretarial moratoria on leasing activities shall have no force or effect, and declaring that previous permitting and environmental review documents shall satisfy the requirements of multiple laws. Some other proposals, by contrast, would repeal the ANWR leasing program and designate the Coastal Plain as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System under the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. §§1131 et seq.).

Some conditions for future lease sales are required by law. For example, P.L. 115-97 limits surface development to 2,000 acres, which need not be concentrated in a single area. Congress could consider whether to mandate other conditions for oil and gas development in the Refuge—for instance, by revisiting provisions considered in earlier bills related to seasonal closures, land reclamation, species protection, use of the best available technology, employment of Alaska Natives, pipeline construction standards, and other matters.

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