

One of the longest lasting fights over the federal public lands has been whether to open up portions of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas development. The Refuge is one of the most important and largest protected areas in North America – it is unusual in that it protects the entire migratory area for a large caribou herd, as well as important habitat for the polar bear, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act because of climate change. The focus for oil drilling potential is an area adjacent to the existing Prudhoe Bay oil field – proponents argue that the footprint for drilling would in total be relatively small, a few thousand acres. Opponents respond that the footprint would be spread throughout the area with long corridors for pipelines and roads, such that even if the total area is relatively small, the negative impact of this development on wildlife and habitat would be quite large, fragmenting much of the habitat and disturbing the caribou and polar bears. In addition, there may be a range of support activities (such as housing for employees) that would disturb the habitat and wildlife, in addition to the direct extraction activities. Proponents also note that Alaska’s economy has been sharply hurt by a combination of dropping oil prices and reduced production from Prudhoe Bay. You can find more details here in [this excellent NY Times article](#).

The Republican budget resolution now being debated in the Senate potentially allows for legislation to open up the Refuge to oil and gas development with a simple majority vote during the upcoming fiscal year. (For more details on the process of reconciliation, see this [earlier blog post](#).) If you are interested, you should contact your Senators on this issue in the next day or two – an earlier blog post with instructions on that is [here](#).

In addition, the Interior Department is considering amending the regulations for the Refuge to allow oil and gas exploration activities. A NY Times article on that proposal is [here](#). That proposed change to the regulations has not been posted in the Federal Register yet, and would require public notice and comment, and also almost surely be challenged in court.