

The Episcopal Church and Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

After 40 years, a lease sale has been announced that will open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development. The Episcopal Church [opposes drilling in this region](#) because of our broad commitments to environmental protection and our [long connection to the Gwich'in people](#) who strongly oppose fossil fuel development in the Refuge.

For thousands of years, the [Gwich'in](#) people have followed the migratory route of the Porcupine caribou herd through what is now the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. However, each summer, the caribou go where the people do not: the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge. On the Coastal Plain, which the Gwich'in call "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" (The Sacred Place Where Life Begins), the caribou give birth to their calves before restarting their migratory cycle. Nine thousand Gwich'in, many of whom are Episcopalian because of early missionary efforts in Alaska, still make their home along this migration route and continue to depend on the caribou for food, clothing, and tools. During times of hardship, caribou can comprise up to 80% of an individual's diet.

The [Tax Cuts and Jobs Act](#) of 2017 mandated two large oil and gas lease sales on the Coastal Plain—the Sacred Place Where Life Begins. The Department of the Interior prioritized the goal of achieving these sales over all other uses for the Refuge. In their record of decision, for example, DOI selected the most environmentally destructive option to open the Refuge because it offered the most certainty of leasing the required number of acres ([Record of Decision](#), p.15).

Proponents of development, including some native Inupiat members who live in the Refuge, cite economic development and limited environmental impact as key reasons to drill. However, oil and gas development does not guarantee these outcomes.

Oil and gas are the backbone of Alaska's economy, but they can't remain so forever. The fossil fuel industry employs a [quarter of the Alaskan workforce](#) and funds up to 90% of the state government's unrestricted revenue through royalties even with a long-term decline in oil production. Alaska contains vast, untapped oil reserves—such as the one in the Arctic Refuge—but a growing fracking industry in the lower 48 states, [melting permafrost](#) that threatens Alaska's infrastructure longevity, and the potential for rapid, large-scale demand changes in the world's energy market make the long-term value of this oil uncertain. Even in the short-term, lease sale revenue projections are likely [overly optimistic](#) and will generate less local economic development than proponents claim. Drilling in the Arctic Refuge will not solve the underlying financial issues caused by Alaska's overreliance on fossil fuel revenue.

Fossil fuel extraction has a smaller environmental impact today than in the past, yet in a disturbance-sensitive habitat like the Arctic Refuge, this smaller footprint still harms endangered polar bears, migratory birds, and the Porcupine caribou herd. In addition to serving as the Porcupine caribou herd calving grounds, the Arctic Refuge is a nesting ground for [migratory birds from all fifty states](#) and the most important onshore denning site for polar bears. Warming arctic temperatures already stress these species; additional human disturbance from oil and gas development could bring about their extinction. Even the best available technology [misses polar bear dens about half the time](#), for example, risking dens being crushed or abandoned during exploratory oil and gas development.

We urge Congress and Alaskan communities to seek long-lasting and sustainable development options that are good for people, protect critical natural habitat, and honor sacred tribal spaces.