



ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Trump's Energy Policies Put Alaska in the Climate Crosshairs

By [Ryan Richards](#) | Posted on November 20, 2019, 12:01 am



Getty/Wolfgang Kaehler

People in kayaks watch a bald eagle in Takatz Bay on Baranof Island, Tongass National Forest, Alaska.

Since taking office in 2017, the Trump administration has had Alaska's wild places in its crosshairs. This winter, the administration will attempt to auction off [the coastal plain](#) of the Arctic National

Wildlife Refuge to drilling, which would have extensive impacts on a pristine ecosystem and the Alaska Native communities that [depend](#) on its resources for subsistence. And in the coming weeks, the Trump administration is likely [to remove protections](#) for roadless areas in the Tongass National Forest—a step that would open more than 9 million acres of the world's [largest old-growth temperate rainforest](#) to potential logging.

But the environmental impacts of these decisions are not confined solely to the wildlife, waters, and communities in and around these two places. If and when the Trump administration moves forward with its attacks on the Arctic Refuge and the Tongass National Forest, these actions will result in a significant increase in the United States' greenhouse gas emissions—potentially up to 5 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent overall. That increase is [equivalent](#) to the annual emissions of slightly more than 1 billion passenger vehicles; there were [1.1 billion](#) of these vehicles globally in 2015. These impacts will amplify the effects of climate change around the world, including elsewhere in Alaska—a state that is already experiencing severe impacts due to a changing climate. “It’s impacting subsistence,” [said Sen. Lisa Murkowski](#) (R-AK) at a March Senate panel on climate change. “It’s impacting food security. It’s certainly impacting our economy with our fisheries.” Indeed, Alaska is warming [faster](#) than any other state in the country. The Trump administration’s actions—which would detonate a [so-called](#) carbon bomb in Alaska—are directly at odds with the critical need to address the climate crisis.

Unnecessary drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

In December 2017, a [provision](#) tucked into the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act opened the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas drilling for the first time in its history. Since then, the Trump administration has ignored continued warnings of the [escalating climate crisis](#), instead rushing headlong to drill the refuge while [ignoring public opinion and suppressing science](#), even as signs point to there being [little oil in the refuge](#). In September 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released its [Final Environmental Impact Statement](#) (FEIS) for drilling in the Arctic Refuge, which is one of the last procedural steps required before the government can conduct a lease sale. The Trump administration’s climate change denial is [on full display](#) in the FEIS: In response to a public comment, the BLM [wrote](#) that it “does not agree that the proposed development is inconsistent with maintaining a livable planet (i.e., there is not a climate crisis).”

Despite the false claims in the Trump administration’s environmental review and concerns that [available data vastly overestimate](#) oil potential in the refuge, the BLM’s own oil production estimates predict a scenario that would be catastrophic for the climate. In the FEIS, the BLM estimated that an

average of more than 375,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions would be released each year during extraction alone—more than 26 million tons during the full 70-year period the agency estimates for oil and gas production in the coastal plain. Furthermore, based on the administration's [estimate](#) that oil companies will be able to extract up to 10 billion barrels from the Arctic Refuge over a 70-year period, the downstream combustion of extracted oil and gas would mean another 4.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent released into the atmosphere. (see Figure 1) This is roughly equivalent to [two-thirds](#) of U.S. annual emissions in 2017.

Unnecessary logging in the Tongass National Forest, America's largest natural carbon sink

The temperate rainforests that make up the nearly [17 million-acre](#) Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska are some of the most unique forests in the world. The Tongass still has large stands of old-growth forest—[9.7 million acres](#)—that have never been logged or significantly altered by development. One-third of this old growth is permanently protected in wilderness areas. Most of the remaining [6.3 million acres](#) are in “roadless areas,” which are protected by a [U.S. Forest Service rule](#) that the Trump administration recently proposed to lift for the Tongass. This would make all of the roadless acreage vulnerable to logging and extraction.

The administration's [Tongass Draft Environmental Impact Statement](#) would immediately reclassify 165,000 acres of old growth as “suitable timber land” for logging and place millions more acres at risk of logging over the coming years. These ancient forests make the Tongass a valuable carbon sink—one of the most important ecosystems for storing carbon. One acre of old-growth forest is estimated to [store](#) nearly 70 tons of carbon in leaves, trunks, roots, and soil. In addition, each acre of old-growth forest has the capacity, on average, to sequester, or capture from the air, an additional 1,600 pounds of carbon every year.

The administration's decision to favor logging makes little sense in the Tongass, as the timber industry in Southeast Alaska is [dwarfed](#) by fishing and tourism—sectors that thrive in large part because of their reliance on old-growth forests to protect clean water and spawning habitat for salmon and provide natural amenities that draw visitors from around the world. Market forces and local geography have made Tongass timber uncompetitive with wood from other parts of the country; most of the timber harvested in the Tongass is [shipped overseas for processing](#). And local geography means that the money the U.S. Forest Service spends preparing roads for logging projects exceeds the revenue from timber sales. This has become evident even in historic timber towns such as Ketchikan, where former mill sites are being [remodeled](#) to accommodate cruise ships and tourism businesses.

In a regional and global context, the decision to subsidize more logging makes no sense at all. Any climate change solution will require healthy natural carbon sinks, especially in places such as the Tongass where forests are especially good at capturing carbon. Even limited expansions of logging have major consequences. Areas where the Tongass has been “managed”—including second-growth forests, selectively logged areas, and areas disturbed by roads and other development—sequester **almost 60 percent less** carbon per year than intact forests. All in all, the removal of roadless protections threatens a carbon sink that already stores more than 400 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent and sequesters an additional 3 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually, equivalent to taking **more than 637,000 cars** off the road each year. (see Note in Table 1 for an explanation of calculations)

FIGURE 1

Expanding drilling and logging in Alaska's wild areas will significantly increase greenhouse gas emissions

Estimated emissions from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Tongass National Forest over an expected 70-year period compared with annual global emissions from passenger vehicles

Global emissions from all passenger vehicles in 2015



Emissions from the Trump administration's attacks on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Tongass National Forest over 70 years



Notes: Emissions totals for oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (4,326,478,270 metric tons CO₂e) were calculated using Bureau of Land Management (BLM) estimates for direct and indirect emissions over an expected 70-year period. Threatened carbon stocks in the Tongass National Forest (645,449,700 metric tons CO₂e) are derived from U.S. Forest Service research on the standing carbon stock in old-growth forests as well as observed reductions in sequestration rates in forests that have been affected by logging. The sequestration rate is an annual measure and was therefore extended to the same 70-year period that the BLM had estimated for the Arctic Refuge.

Sources: T.M. Barrett, "Storage and Flux of Carbon in Live Trees, Snags, and Logs in the Chugach and Tongass National Forests" (Wenatchee, WA: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station, 2014), available at https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr889.pdf; U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, "Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program EIS Documents," available at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=152110> (last accessed November 2019); Matthew Nitch Smith, "The number of cars worldwide is set to double by 2040," World Economic Forum, April 22, 2016, available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/the-number-of-cars-worldwide-is-set-to-double-by-2040/>; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator," available at <https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator> (last accessed November 2019).



Conclusion

The Trump administration's decisions to strip protections from the Arctic Refuge and the Tongass National Forest in favor of industry completely ignore climate impacts, which is at odds with **the reality that Alaskans face**. The effects of shrinking sea ice, coastal erosion, and permafrost loss are apparent in Alaskan communities, even providing sufficient evidence for the Alaska Federation of Natives to recently **declare a climate change emergency**. Pursuing the goals of industry without regard for climate impacts places Alaska's communities, fish, wildlife, and overall way of life at risk.

Ryan Richards is a senior policy analyst for Public Lands at the Center for American Progress.

The author would like to thank Matt Lee-Ashley, Sally Hardin, Meghan Miller, Irene Koo, and Keenan Alexander for their contributions to this column.



© 2019 - Center for American Progress