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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*



## Trump wants to spoil Alaska's pristine environment. We can't let it happen.



By **John Podesta**

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The Trump administration's rush to allow oil companies to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the last unspoiled wildlands in the world, has, to no one's surprise, become a complete fiasco.

The fossil-fuel lobbyists who run President Trump's Interior Department have bullied government scientists, ignored public opposition and cut every imaginable corner to hold an auction — this year — that will threaten the largest concentration of polar bears in the United States, the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd and a place of unparalleled natural beauty.

To add public insult to the injury of shameless self-dealing, Trump's point man who was tasked with selling off the refuge to oil companies, Joe Balash, just took a top job at a foreign oil company that — no kidding — has reportedly been "weighing" a bid at the auction that Balash himself organized when he was at the Interior Department.

Investigations and court challenges are sure to come soon. Regardless, the Trump administration's climate calamity in Alaska must be stopped.

Amid the Interior Department's saga of scandal, it can be easy to lose sight of what is at stake in the administration's drive to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Gwich'in people refer to the refuge's coastal plain, which stretches from the edge of the Brooks Range north to the Arctic Ocean, as "the sacred place where life begins." The Porcupine caribou herd — nearly 200,000 strong — migrates to the coastal plain each summer to breed. With Arctic sea ice melting rapidly, the United States' polar bears have become even more dependent on the refuge for their survival.

The mind-boggling reality of the Trump administration effort to drill in the region is that this extraordinary place — and the living things that depend on it — would be sacrificed for oil that the United States does not need and that, in our current climate crisis, our planet cannot afford to burn.

Even the most optimistic proponents of drilling the refuge admit that no significant amount of oil is expected to reach markets until at least 2030. By that time, the United States will need to be well on its way to transforming our transportation system from one dependent on oil to one powered by clean, renewable electricity.

Given this reality, auctioning off drilling rights is economically foolish and environmentally catastrophic. It would attempt to lock the United States — and the world — into future carbon pollution that would devastate our planet. By one estimate, drilling the refuge would contribute an equivalent annual amount of carbon pollution as adding 13 million cars to the road.

The impacts of this pollution will be worsened by Trump's other anti-climate attacks in Alaska, including a push to allow new logging in the world's largest remaining temperate old-growth forest. Trump's plan in the Tongass National Forest will weaken one of America's most powerful and effective carbon sponges and endanger the area's billion-dollar commercial salmon industry.

Detonating a carbon bomb by drilling the refuge while simultaneously chopping down old-growth forest will aggravate the pressures on an Alaskan environment that is already warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world.

In the coming days, the House of Representatives will take a first step toward restoring protections for the coastal plain of the refuge. Rep. Jared Huffman's (D-Calif.)'s Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act, which House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) is expected to bring to the floor for a vote on Thursday, would block the administration's oil folly and reinstate long-standing protections for the refuge.

In the event that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) stops the House bill, it will fall upon a new presidential administration and a new Congress to rescue the refuge and protect the Tongass to avert climate catastrophe.