Prospects for Arctic oil development look good

Alaskans working hard to convince Congress to open AOR

With the risks low and the benefits to the nation high, there appears to be enough votes in Congress this fall to open the Coastal Plain/Arctic Oil Reserve of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration and development. Instead of fighting the inevitable, the Department of the Interior should be helping craft rules and regulations for the AOR's orderly development, advised Senator Bennett Johnston, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, at an ANWR hearing in August. With the politics increasingly aligning behind development, Johnston said it's time for the Clinton administration to talk about terms and conditions for leasing the Coastal Plain/AOR, which accounts for about eight percent of the Arctic refuge. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, however, intends to recommend a presidential veto of the expected congressional budget measure authorizing development. But most Washington insiders don't believe the ANWR measure will derail the pending budget bill since it is perceived as a relatively minor aspect of the budget package. "The budget might be vetoed for other reasons, and the Coastal Plain obviously will be an added lure, but a budget veto in this country is politically a very hot potato to handle, especially if you're up for election within a year," said Roger Herrera, an Arctic Power advisor and RDC board member. "There will certainly be a degree of pressure on Congress to button up the budgetary process, including all the highly controversial aspects that are in it."

RDC testifies before Congress on wetlands reform...Page 2
Caribou debate...Page 6
'95 salmon catch...Page 7

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Inside

- RDC testifies before Congress on wetlands reform...
- Caribou debate...
- '95 salmon catch...

The Inupiat Eskimo village of Kaktovik, located directly adjacent to the AOR, supports oil and gas exploration and production in the oil reserve. Kaktovik residents, like their Gwich'in neighbors far to the south, also subsistence hunt caribou. (Photo by Carl Portman)
AWC makes Alaska’s case on wetlands before congressional subcommittee

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), wetlands total 43.3% of Alaska’s surface area. What that statistic doesn’t tell you, is practically speaking, unless you are on a glacier or a mountain, you are in wetlands. It’s not Waterworld, but in Alaska, we live surrounded by a sea of wetlands, interspersed with millions of acres of inhospitable terrain covered by a variety of conservation designations. By any standard, a person would be hard pressed not to look at the state with substantial conservation wetlands. Over 99% of intact historical wetlands is a formidable record. Yet Alaska faces a unique dilemma in the wetlands debate.

Chairman Fairclough, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments in support of S.851, the Wetlands Regulatory Reform Act of 1995, and the provisions that specifically address Alaska’s uniqueness.

The Alaska Wetlands Coalition was formed in 1980 to work on federal regulations and to bring community perception and balance to wetlands regulation in Alaska. AWC strives to educate policymakers about the uniqueness of Alaska and to help guide national wetlands policy in Alaska.

Resolutions of support for Congression change to the wetlands regulatory program in Alaska have been passed statewide, by the cities of Kenai, Craig, Nome, Wasilla, Fairbanks, Wrangell, the Municipality ofJuneau, and the Boroughs of the Aleutians East, Sitka, Fairbanks North Star, Ketchikan Gateway, Kodiak Island and Matanuska-Susitna. In the hearing record by Senator Murkowski.

Just as scarcity is an overriding concern elsewhere in the nation, the shear abundance of wetlands in Alaska is an important element which is unaccounted for in current regulatory schemes.

Caribou, Arctic oil debate…

Bristol Bay net hands inlet catch among lowest in decade

Fishermen caught a record 43 million red salmon in Bristol Bay this year, a record catch for the century-old fishery, but the Upper Cook Inlet commercial salmon harvest this season was the lowest in 10 years.

The Upper Cook Inlet net catch netted fishermen about $120 million. This year’s catch exceeded the previous record catch of 41 million reds in 1993.

Meanwhile, salmon markets in Japan have crashed to their lowest levels in recent history, resulting in low demand for the red salmon. Bristol Bay red salmon catch came in at 2.9 million, which makes up 90 percent of the fishery’s value. The commercial harvest for Upper Cook Inlet totaled just over 20 million this season.

Wetlands testimony (Continued from page 2)

abounding in the ability to use wetlands, especially on private property or for community needs, is expensive and wasteful for the American people. No net loss is a “zero sum” approach which in Alaska, doesn’t work. It results in society’s scarce dollars being spent regulating low value, abundant and non-traditional wetlands. And the policy actually punishes the state that has the best conservation record, which is an inappropriate public policy outcome.

The problem is not only with the administration of the law, but with the law itself. Congress needs to specify which wetlands to regulate because both the administrative and judicial approaches have failed to reflect common sense, predictability or balance. Eliminating low value and abundant wetlands from Section 404 rulings means that jurisdictional wetlands will become more sensitive. The agencies will have more resources to make the permitting process more efficient and predictable. The AWC believes wetlands program can be improved at the national level in a good job protecting important wetlands while accommodating quality of life and community growth.

The challenge is under distress about wetland regulation. Court decisions have added new hurdles, with lawsuits being threatened and filed. Uncertainty about the future of land use permits discussions at the local government level at the national level. The Federal Wildlife Service is using the Corps of Engineers over general permits right now.

The agencies are needed to consolidate agency responsibility, to expedite routine permitting, to increase flexibility in the program and to provide greater predictability across the nation, not just Alaska.
Guest Opinion
by Father Michael Hornick

Porchine caribou herd is a political pawn

If you’ve ever had the opportunity to be a judge in the annual essay contest sponsored by RDC, I’m sure you have been asked as shocked as I was to read some, if not most of the entries. Words like, “destroying,” “wiped out,” “nothing left for the grandchildren” are terms commonly seen in these essays. Don’t get me wrong, I think children should be allowed to voice their own opinions, just as adults should. But, when it is blatantly obvious that the entire purpose was a result of being exposed only to distorted views dispensed from one-sided environmental curriculum, it makes me sad, and then it makes me angry that, in many ways, we as parents have let this happen.

Your children and mine have been inundated with information on why we must preserve the earth’s resources. Until recently and by comparison, very little has been taught about the unique and critical balance between responsible development of our resources and the economy. Let’s face it, it’s much easier for the environmentalists to prey on the minds of those who can easily be convinced that “Bambi” is at risk than to discuss the reality of what our resources provide and the positive effects responsible development has on our economy.

And talk about reality, within five to ten years, these children will be voting on two factors: the willingness of volunteers and the community to donate time and talent in updating and improving materials and secondarily your support. Frankly, it is imperative that business and industry adequately fund this popular and most necessary program. Your commitment to resource education through AMEREF will help ensure that students across Alaska will be exposed to a balanced viewpoint. Your contribution will help AMEREF get new kits into the hands of teachers who want to provide their students with a full range of perspectives.

Are you a school-age child, I urge you to get involved, ask them what they are learning and talk to them about responsible resource development. If you don’t like what you hear, sit down with their teachers during conference and ask them if they have been informed about the benefits of the AMEREF program. If not, let AMEREF or RDC know and they will take the lead.

Resource education for our children in Alaska is critical and begins where most things should — at home. Your individual and corporate support will keep this program and our kids strong growing.

Out of the mouths of babes

At the heart of the AMEREF program is the Alaska Resources Kit. This Alaska-specific work kit, funded by businesses, industry and individuals, provides teachers with lesson plans and student activities designed to “connect the dots” between development and our economy.

The continued popular acceptance of the AMEREF program is a strong indication of its success with teachers and students. RDC commends all of you who have donated many years of your time and the funds it has taken to keep this program alive and strong.

AMEREF is building bridges of understanding between teachers, students and industry. But its success in sustaining and improving the program depends on two factors: the willingness of volunteers from industry and the education community to donate time and talent in updating and improving materials and secondarily your support.

RDC hosts New Zealanders on Flattop Mountain

RDC staff and board members, including President Elizabeth Rensch and Vice President Scott Thorson (center), escorted New Zealand Consul General Terry Baker and his wife, Jan, (right) to the summit of Flattop Mountain last month. Before the 3,500-foot ascent, Baker briefed the RDC Executive Committee on New Zealand business interests in Alaska.

(Photos by Carl Portman)

Page 6 / RESOURCE REVIEW / August 1995

Editor’s Note: Father Mike Hornick, a priest of the Archdiocese of Anchorage for 26 years, was an active member of the Citizens Advisory Committee of the Alaska Land Use Council until it expired in December 1990. The Council was mandated by the same Federal law which created ANWR. A version of the following Guest Opinion appeared in The Voice of the Times, August 2, 1995.
Facts-at-a-glance

Arctic Oil Reserve (AOR)

Congressional action on ANWR entails final stretch

Call to action