

# ANWR boosters wary of new, lower oil estimates

by *Tundra Times* staff

Supporters of developing the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge have been celebrating recently as a sympathetic Congress moves closer to allowing oil exploration there. However, a number of obstacles remain before development can begin. For one, President Bill Clinton has promised to veto any measure that would open up the refuge. Recently, government geologists dramatically reduced their estimates of how much recoverable oil there is under the refuge.

The U.S. Geological Survey has slashed its 1989 maximum estimate of 11.67 billion barrels of recoverable oil to 5.15 billion barrels. The 1989 minimum estimate has been reduced from 697 million to 148 million barrels.

The agency says the figures should be considered rough, and the story is not as statistically

straightforward as it might look. Closer examination reveals that the low end numbers are based on a 95 percent likelihood, while the high estimates are based on only a five percent likelihood.

However, such a dramatic drop in the estimates of potential maximum-minimum levels of recoverable oil in the refuge raise interesting questions. Some supporters of drilling have already charged that the USGS report was timed to influence the political debate unfolding in Congress over a proposal to include refuge leasing revenues as part of projected income for the federal budget.

In press reports, USGS acknowledged that its new figures were generated in a three-day period. It was not immediately clear who had requested the figures, or what new data or analysis had led to such a drastic re-

duction in the estimates.

Reports of the USGS figures did not appear in media reports until several days after a much-publicized hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Resources that was held on August 3 to consider the prospects of oil leasing in the refuge. Witnesses appearing before the committee included Sen. Ted Stevens; John Leshy, Interior Dept. solicitor; Judy Brady, executive director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association; John Shively, Alaska commissioner of natural resources; Delbert Rexford, special assistant to the mayor of the North Slope Borough; Michael Joyce, ARCO Alaska; Roger Herrera, consultant to Arctic Power, a pro-development lobbying group; David Cline, vice-president, Audobon Society; Oliver Leavitt, vice president, Arctic Slope Regional Corp.; and Sarah James,

Gwich'in Steering Committee.

In other recent ANWR developments, Sam Kito, Jr. has been retained by the North Slope Borough to the borough's Congressional lobbying effort in support of opening the refuge for development.

"Congress needs to hear from the people who live in the immediate area and will be most directly affected," said George Ahmaogak, borough mayor. "Sam Kito knows our people and he knows our position on this issue."

Although the issue has yet to receive much attention in the current round of refuge development debate, some analysts have reiterated concerns about the safety of the trans-Alaska pipeline, which would be utilized to transport ANWR oil to tidewater at Valdez.

This summer has seen action by other participants in the debate.

Gov. Tony Knowles unveiled a stepped-up \$650,000 state campaign to push for ANWR leasing. Gwich'in Athabascan leaders, representing communities dependent on caribou that migrate annually to ANWR for spring calving, criticized the U.S. Senate for failing to defeat a measure that would have allowed projected ANWR leasing revenues to be credited to the federal budget—even before a decision has been made to allow oil drilling there.

"It's innocent genocide," said Sarah James of the Gwich'in Steering Committee. "These people don't know what they're voting for. They mostly just vote how their friends do, that's all."

In a lower-profile development, the Canadian ambassador to the U.S., made a recent trip to Alaska to visit Gwich'in and Inupiat communities that might be affected by refuge development.