

F & WS wants Coastal Plain drilled

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended opening the entire 1.5-million-acre coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for petroleum exploration and development.

It suggests the last tracts offered would be on 242,000 acres along the upper Jago River in the southeast portion of the plain.

That is the principal calving area of the migratory Porcupine caribou herd, estimated to number from 150,000 to 180,000 animals.

William Horn, Interior Department's assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, said the delayed leasing option would allow officials to write stipulations to protect the herd, based on earlier development activities.

Another proposed stipulation would halt work during the spring calving period.

One Interior Department estimate predicts the coastal plain could contain as much as 29.4 billion barrels of oil, with 9.4 billion of those barrels recoverable.

America's largest field, Prudhoe Bay 1509 miles to the west, was estimated to contain about 9.6 billion barrels when it was found.

Interior's most conservative estimate of the coastal plain puts the recoverable volume at 600 million barrels.

Geologists say more precise estimates are impossible without exploration. Current estimates are based on seismic data.

In an earlier call for the coastal plain to be opened for oil and gas exploration

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tion and development, Arctic Slope Regional Corp. Pres. Jacob Adams said it has "the highest potential of any onshore oil and gas area in the U.S."

And, North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak, Sr. said, "During a time of declining energy reserves, responsible development is critical to Alaska and to the energy security of the nation."

If the field is developed, North Slope residents with sub-surface rights would share in royalty revenues generated by petroleum sales. And, the State of Alaska would get 90 percent of on-shore development royalties.

Following a 60-day public comment period, the report must be approved by Interior Secretary Donald Hodel before submission to the U.S. Congress. That body will make the final decision regarding development.

In announcing Interior's recommendation to Hodel, Horn said the department would ask for authority "to impose restrictions to ensure environmental integrity during oil and gas operations."

"Development must result in no unnecessary adverse effects, and unavoidable habitat losses should be fully compensated," he said.

That development could include construction of 100 miles of pipeline to link the field to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline which runs from the Prudhoe Bay Field to Valdez on Prince William Sound.

And, according to the report, 180 miles of road and four airfields would also be needed to support the field.

The report, ordered by Congress in 1980 when it passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, also reviews management options for the area.

Those could include leasing all or a portion of the plain; permitting additional exploration including the drilling of exploratory wells; taking no action; or designating the plain as wilderness.

The latter option is preferred by

many conservationists, including the groups called Trustees for Alaska and the Alaska Coalition.

Cong. Morris Udall, the Arizona Democrat who chairs the House's Interior Committee, last year introduced legislation that would have placed the entire wildlife refuge, including the coastal plain, into wilderness status.

The measure died, but a similar bill is being written for introduction to the 100th Congress.

The development versus wilderness arguments will be propounded and other management issues explored during public meetings Interior will conduct within the next two months in Kaktovik, Anchorage and Washington, D.C.