



## National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska ConocoPhillips' Road to Developing Sensitive Areas?

### *The National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska*

The National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve) is the largest single unit of public lands in the nation. Encompassing 23.5 million acres, the Reserve harbors rich and vital wild lands and wildlife. The Colville River Delta, within the Reserve, is the largest and most productive river delta in northern Alaska. It is an Aquatic Resource of National Importance and provides high-quality habitats for hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds, some of which are listed under the Endangered Species Act, as well as the iconic and threatened polar bear. While oil and gas activities may have a place in the Reserve, where it does occur it must be done with sensitivity to these other values of the Reserve.

### *Background on ConocoPhillips Alaska, Inc.'s Colville Delta-5 Project*

ConocoPhillips Alaska, Inc. is seeking permits for its proposed Colville Delta-5 production drill site, which would become the first permanent road and infrastructure to be developed within the Reserve. The project will include an all-weather road through the Colville River Delta, as well as a bridge and suspended pipeline over the Nigliq Channel that would connect CD-5 to the existing Alpine oil field across a major Colville River channel. If built, this infrastructure would make the delta the staging area for development in the Reserve, threatening the very values that ConocoPhillips claimed to respect through its "roadless" development promise.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has a mandate under the Clean Water Act (CWA) to protect our nation's waters, denied ConocoPhillips a CWA wetlands permit for the project because it was not the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative. Instead, the Corps urged consideration of an under-river pipeline with no bridge or road, similar to ConocoPhillips's existing under-river pipeline below the main Colville River connecting its Alpine oil field to the North Slope oil field complex and Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Despite a history of using under-river pipeline infrastructure, ConocoPhillips appealed the Corps' decision, and the Corps is now reconsidering its original decision.

### *A Road to Ruin?*

The Interior Department has recently claimed that underground pipelines have significant environmental hazards. However, there are also continual spills from above-ground pipelines like those in the North Slope oil fields. Risks also exist from above-ground pipelines, including those hanging from a bridge over a major Arctic river, where powerful ice jams cause river breakup, and where flooding and bank erosion due to climate change are increasingly experienced.

**The Corps must be careful not to let ConocoPhillips' zeal to build a permanent road, one which could be used to access sensitive areas within the Reserve that are not associated with CD-5, cloud its decision making on the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative for access to CD-5, nor should this review process undermine science or set a poor regulatory precedent.** The Colville River Delta is vital to the long-term health of the surrounding wildlife habitat and communities. It is in the public interest to ensure that the the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative is given full evaluation so that the waters of the United States are protected.

**Oil and gas development on Alaska's North Slope will continue, but where and how raises significant issues. The United States must be careful not to lose focus on responsible permitting and the protection of special places within the Reserve.**



Summer sun glints across wetlands of Colville River Delta, Alaska Arctic coast, Beaufort Sea beyond. Copyright Gary Braasch.

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