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Sens. Cantwell and Kirk introduce bipartisan bill to protect the Arctic Refuge

Cantwell and Kirk championed efforts to prevent Arctic Refuge drilling in 2005

Washington – Today, Senators Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) reaffirmed the bipartisan history of support for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by co-introducing legislation to permanently protect it. This bill would designate the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’s Coastal Plain as Wilderness.

Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower led the effort to protect this area for future generations half a century ago when he set aside 8.9 million acres as the Arctic National Wildlife Range in 1960. The Arctic Refuge has enjoyed widespread public support from both sides of the aisle ever since. In fact, the first Wilderness bill for the Arctic Refuge (S. 1804) was introduced by Senator Bill Roth (R-DE) in 1987. Today, Senator Cantwell and Kirk add a new chapter to this bipartisan legislative legacy for Wilderness for the Coastal Plain of the Refuge. Representatives Rush Holt (D-NJ) and Mike Fitzpatrick (R-PA) are leading similar legislation in the House of Representatives (H.R. 139).

The Arctic Refuge and its Coastal Plain – the Refuge’s “biological heart” – are home to polar bears, grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines, muskoxen and more than 130 species of migratory birds. The Refuge is one of the last pristine, untouched wilderness areas in America.

Quote from the Gwich’in Steering Committee:

“Time and again, Senator Cantwell has proven her support for tribal sovereignty and subsistence,” said Princess Lucaj, Executive Director, Gwich’in Steering Committee. “And time and again, Senator Kirk has stepped up to the plate to lead the effort to protect the Arctic Refuge within his party. Protection of the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge is protection of the Gwich’in way of life. Such thoughtful, discerning, and decisive leadership from these two Senators is exactly what we need to see this sacred place permanently protected for all future generations yet to come.”

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Quote from The Episcopal Church:

“The Episcopal Church supports protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, both to preserve the ecological integrity of God’s creation, and to safeguard the subsistence rights of the Gwich’in people, with whom we stand in solidarity. The introduction of this bill represents a significant step toward ensuring the Refuge’s protection, and The Episcopal Church commends Senator Cantwell and Senator Kirk for their leadership on this important issue,” said Jayce Hafner, Domestic Policy Analyst for The Episcopal Church.

Quotes from Conservation Groups:

“Senators Kirk and Cantwell have long been the Arctic Refuge’s defensive champions, protecting it from threats of oil and gas drilling in both chambers of Congress for many years,” said Cindy Shogan, Executive Director, Alaska Wilderness League. “With today’s introduction of this Wilderness bill, they now assume the role of Arctic Refuge’s offensive champions as well. Senators Cantwell and Kirk recognize that some places are just too special to drill for oil, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge tops that list.”

“Senator Kirk has worked to safeguard the Arctic Refuge from the moment he first set foot on Capitol Hill; it is only fitting that he be part of this bipartisan effort to protect it permanently,” said David Jenkins, President, ConservAmerica EF.

“Senator Cantwell and Senator Kirk’s bipartisan bill will finally recognize in law what scientists have known for years: that the coastal plain of the magnificent Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a true wilderness treasure,” said Defenders of Wildlife president and CEO Jamie Rappaport Clark. “A place like nowhere else on earth, wildlife has thrived here undisturbed for eons and should be protected for just as long.”

“We applaud Senators Cantwell and Kirk and Representatives Holt and Fitzpatrick for taking this long-needed step toward permanent Wilderness protection of the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. For more than 50 years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has done an outstanding job of managing the Arctic Refuge to protect its magnificent wildlife, habitat, and wilderness values. In contrast to the destructive oil industry give-aways advocated by our Alaska politicians, the American people have clearly expressed their desires for protection of this unique gem for generations to come. Senator Cantwell’s and Kirk’s leadership embodies the highest American values of conservation and stewardship of our land and natural resources. On behalf of the thousands of volunteers who work closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect and enhance the National Wildlife Refuge System, we thank these sponsors for their bipartisan actions and foresight,” said David C. Raskin, Friends of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges.

“This legislation reaffirms the longstanding bipartisan support that exists for protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” said Alex Taurel, Deputy Legislative Director, League of Conservation Voters. “Some places are just too special to drill in, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of those places. Let’s leave it as it is, so future generations can enjoy this pristine American wilderness.”
“The Coastal Plain is the biological heart of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, home to nearly 200 species of birds that have ranges that reach all 50 states,” said Brian Moore, Legislative Director, National Audubon Society. “This legislation would ensure future generations will continue to enjoy their backyard connection to the Arctic Refuge.”

“Senators Cantwell and Kirk are protecting a wonderful part of America’s heritage by preserving this critical birthing ground for the Porcupine caribou herd, polar bears, grizzly bears, musk oxen, Arctic foxes and other wildlife,” said Charles Clusen, Director of the Alaska Project, Natural Resources Defense Council.

“Alaskans played a major role in establishing the Arctic Refuge over 50-years ago to preserve wildlife and wilderness and continue to cherish this unique landscape of Alaska. We thank Senators Cantwell and Kirk for this bill to add necessary protections for the Coastal Plain,” said Pamela A. Miller, Arctic Program Director of Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

“Drilling delivers a one-two punch to America’s Arctic, destroying one of our most pristine places in order to dredge up dirty fuels that will only further melt the Arctic when they're burned into the atmosphere. Senators Cantwell and Kirk understand that if we are serious about protecting our special places and fixing the climate crisis, we have to start by preserving the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This legislation is a great step forward that not only protects our wild lands and wildlife, but ensures future generations of Americans will have a safe and healthy planet to enjoy,” said Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club Alaska Program Director.

“We are deeply grateful to Sen. Cantwell and Sen. Kirk for this legislation,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska regional director for The Wilderness Society. “The Arctic Refuge is one of the greatest and most stunning tracts of wildland left in America. Giving it permanent protection as wilderness would be a wonderful victory for Alaska Natives who have called it home for thousands of years, and for everyone who value wild places and want to protect our public lands for future generations.”

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