

GREENWIRE

CLIMATE AND WEATHER & 8 OTHERS

Green groups demand tougher review of Arctic oil project

The Bureau of Land Management should commit to an expansive review of ConocoPhillips' proposed Willow project in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, a coalition of environmental groups said.



BY: **HEATHER RICHARDS** | 02/03/2022 01:49 PM EST



Drilling operations at the Doyon Rig 19 at the ConocoPhillips location in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. | Judy Patrick/AP Photo

GREENWIRE | A coalition of environmental groups are urging the Biden administration to conduct a more extensive review of a \$6 billion oil project in the Arctic.

The Biden administration's Bureau of Land Management is already writing a supplemental environmental assessment for ConocoPhillips' proposed Willow project in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), after a federal judge last year tossed the Trump administration's approval of the project for failing to fully account for climate impacts ([Energywire](#), Aug. 19, 2021).

But in a [letter](#) yesterday, 13 conservation groups that oppose Willow said BLM should seize this chance to review the entire project. That means opening up the existing environmental impact statement, inviting more public dialogue and considering Willow's viability due to its climate and wildlife impacts.

"BLM should not rush or truncate the scope of this [environmental] review," the groups wrote in a letter to the BLM Alaska office. "The Court's decision creates an obligation and opportunity for BLM to fully reconsider Willow and the agency should not limit its analysis to the shortcomings identified by the Court."

The letter was signed by the Alaska Wilderness League, Audubon Alaska, the Conservation Lands Foundation, the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice, Friends of the Earth, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society and Trustees for Alaska. Several of the groups were challengers in the successful lawsuit against Willow.

For its part, the administration said its review of the project will "address deficiencies identified by the court decision," according to a post on BLM's planning website for the project.

A spokesperson for the Interior Department declined to comment on the letter.

Willow has proved an Arctic-size challenge for the climate-focused White House ([Energywire](#), Jan. 7).

The Biden administration froze oil and gas activity in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge early last year. And it has promised a significant reform agenda for oil and gas development across public lands that includes scaling back the Trump administration's attempt to open most of NPR-A to oil and gas interests ([Energywire](#), Jan. 11).

But that approach has fallen short for climate activists, who've rallied against Willow due to its strategic importance for the future of drilling on federal lands in the Arctic.

Historic exploration and production of federal minerals in NPR-A — located near ANWR on Alaska's North Slope — has been limited due to distance to market and lack of infrastructure like pipelines. If ConocoPhillips is allowed to build out Willow, industry would end up reshaping that region, securing a place deeper into the reserve and embarking on drilling expected to last decades. Development of the Willow find could help replace declining historic oil fields in one of the most oil-dependent states in the country.

It's already encouraged more exploration. Last year, an Australian company said it had found as much as 1 billion barrels of oil equivalent in NPR-A south of Willow ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 1, 2021).

A spokesperson for ConocoPhillips said in a statement last year that the company remains "committed to Willow as the next significant North Slope project" and that it "offers extensive benefit to the public and to the residents of the North Slope."

The environmental groups, however, say the project's climate impacts would be severe.

"ConocoPhillips estimates that Willow may produce up to 200,000 barrels of oil per day for at least 30 years, resulting in 260 million metric tons carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂E)," the environmental groups state in their letter. "BLM is obligated to consider all of the known direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of this proposal."

The groups also said the Trump-era Willow review had been rushed. They asked the administration to ensure the village of Nuiqsut's position on the project is elevated.

Nuiqsut is one of the few villages in the 23-million-acre reserve and is located near ConocoPhillips' existing oil and gas operations in NPR-A. Village leaders had asked the Trump administration to slow down its approval of the project and voiced worries about air quality impacts from increased industrialization.



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