

Congress debates oil drilling in largest US wildlife refuge

By **DAN JOLING**
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Sometime next April, pregnant cows in the Porcupine Caribou Herd in Canada will take the lead in an annual migration of nearly 200,000 animals north to Alaska.

From winter grounds in Canada's Yukon Territory, the caribou traveling in small and large groups will cross rivers and gaps in the mighty Brooks Range on the 400-mile journey. Their destination is the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a strip of flat tundra between the

mountains and Arctic Ocean.

The plain provides food and a vantage point from which caribou can spot predators from far away. But beneath the lichens and cotton grass, there's a hidden resource: crude oil.

Opening the coastal plain to petroleum drilling, with the hope for jobs and new oil for the trans-Alaska pipeline, has stood as a goal of every Alaska governor and the state's members of Congress for three decades. And the opportunity is rising again in federal budget discussions.

Congressional Republicans are pushing for ref-

uge drilling with a projected \$1 billion from lease sales to help pay for President Donald Trump's proposed tax cut. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on Wednesday advanced the drilling measure. Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski, a Republican U.S. senator, says oil production later would bring in much more revenue.

For three decades, environmental groups have fought opening oil development on the plain — home to musk oxen and polar bear dens.

“What this bill would do is turn America's last great wilderness into a lost wil-

derness,” said Adam Kolton, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League.

The refuge begins at the Arctic Ocean with salt marshes, barrier islands and beaches and transitions to the treeless coastal plain. About 25 miles from the ocean, the Brooks Range rises, providing spectacular vistas and habitat for Dall sheep, wolves and grizzlies.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1960 during President Dwight Eisenhower's administration. Congress in 1980 expanded the refuge to nearly the size of South Carolina

with the provision that 2,300 square miles of the coastal plain be studied for natural resources.

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates the plain holds 10.4 billion barrels of oil, which Murkowski calls North America's greatest prospect for conventional petroleum production.

Murkowski has promoted legislation limiting drill pads and other infrastructure to 2,000 acres. But, while exploratory wells could be drilled only when caribou are not present, production would bring a web of drill pads connected by roads and pipelines.

Matthew Rexford grew up in the Inupiat Eskimo village of Kaktovik on a Beaufort Sea barrier island, the only village within the refuge. His people for centuries have survived on caribou, fish and bowhead whales, he said, but were brought out of starvation and third-world conditions by oil development at nearby Prudhoe Bay.

Tax revenue to the local borough, Alaska's equivalent of a county, provided money for schools, clinics and amenities taken for granted elsewhere such as indoor plumbing. Rexford supports drilling in portions of the coastal plain.

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