

September 30, 2025

National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A): A Summary

The National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) is a 23-million-acre area in northern Alaska owned and administered by the federal government. Originally designated as an emergency oil reserve for the United States Navy in 1923, the NPR-A has been under the administration of the Department of the Interior's (DOI's) Bureau of Land Management (BLM) since 1976. Management and development of the NPR-A have been subjects of congressional interest for decades due in part to the unique biodiversity of the NPR-A, its historical and cultural importance to some Alaska Native communities, and the potentially large oil and gas deposits estimated in the region. In recent years, debates have centered around whether to increase oil and gas development in the NPR-A and/or to expand areas within the NPR-A prioritized for conservation, recreation, and other values.

Background and History

In the early 20th century, as the Navy began converting its fleet from coal-burning to oil-burning engines, the federal government became increasingly concerned with the adequacy of oil reserves in the event of a war or national emergency. To address these concerns, the government began withdrawing large areas of federal land for the purposes of assuring a stockpile of fuel supplies specifically for use by the Navy. The first three of these Naval Petroleum Reserves were located in California (Elk Hills and Buena Vista) and central Wyoming (Teapot Dome). In 1923, President Warren G. Harding issued an executive order (E.O.) establishing the fourth—and largest—of these reserves in Alaska (E.O. 3797-A, February 27, 1923), known then as Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4.

By the mid-1970s, the original demand and interest in Navy-specific reserves had waned, due in part to evolving national defense needs, changes in commercial production and capacity, and shifting congressional priorities for management and use of the lands. In 1976, Congress enacted the Naval Petroleum Reserves Production Act (NPRPA; P.L. 94-258), which, among its provisions, authorized commercial development of the first three reserves and transferred administration of Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4 in Alaska to DOI's BLM. The law also renamed Reserve No. 4 as the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, commonly known as the NPR-A.

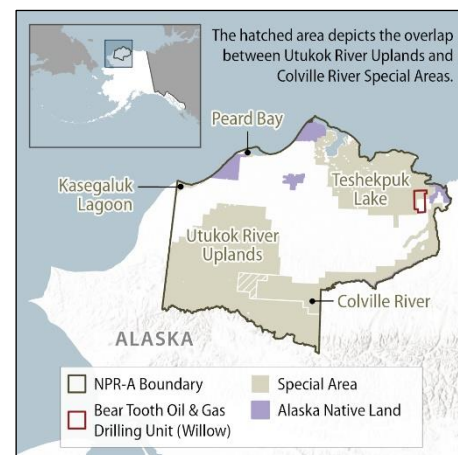
Naval Petroleum Reserves Production Act

A 1980 amendment to the NPRPA (P.L. 96-514) directed the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to undertake “an expeditious program of competitive leasing of oil and gas” (42 U.S.C. §6506a) in the NPR-A. Under the NPRPA, 50% of receipts from oil and gas lease sales, rentals, bonuses, and royalties (*revenues*) are paid to the State of Alaska and 50% are paid to the U.S. Treasury. Recent legislation (P.L.

119-21) amended the NPRPA to provide that, beginning in FY2034, 70% of revenues are to be paid to Alaska and the remaining 30% to the Treasury (see “Legislation and Issues for Congress”). NPRPA requires that disbursements to Alaska be used for building and maintaining public facilities and services, with a priority for “subdivisions ... most directly or severely impacted” by oil and gas development in the NPR-A (42 U.S.C. §6506a(l)).

The NPRPA also identifies two areas—Utukok River and Teshekpuk Lake—as containing significant surface values (e.g., recreational, ecological, historical, scenic) and requires that any exploration in these areas be conducted in a manner that will “assure the maximum protection of such surface values to the extent consistent with the requirements” for oil and gas exploration and development in the NPR-A (42 U.S.C. §6504). It also authorizes the Secretary to identify other areas (known as *Special Areas*) in the NPR-A containing any significant surface values and to similarly assure such protection of these areas. Since enactment, five special areas have been designated under this authority (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska



Source: CRS using data from Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Note: Boundaries of Special Areas are codified in BLM regulations at 43 C.F.R. §2361.20 and do not reflect proposed agency actions announced in June 2025 to adjust or eliminate certain Special Areas.

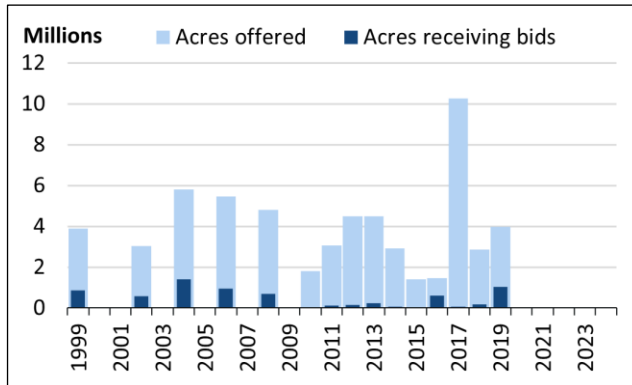
Oil and Gas Development in the NPR-A

Between 1981 and 1984, BLM offered the first four lease sales in the NPR-A. After receiving no qualified bids in 1984 and concluding from annual surveys that the oil industry had “little interest” in further NPR-A lease sales, BLM did not hold another NPR-A lease sale for 15 years (1998 Northeast NPR-A Integrated Activity Plan [IAP]). Industry interest in the NPR-A increased after the discovery of the Alpine oil field adjacent to and outside of the boundary of the NPR-A in 1994. From 1999 through 2024,

BLM held 15 NPR-A lease sales, leasing 12% of total acreage offered (**Figure 2**). The percentage of acres successfully leased during each sale ranged between 1% (2017) and 42% (2016). During this period, the highest annual bid amount was \$104 million (\$184 million in 2024 dollars), earned during the 1999 lease sale. The most recent lease sale, in 2019, earned \$11 million (\$14 million in 2024 dollars).

Figure 2. NPR-A Lease Sale Acreage, 1999-2024

Figure is interactive in the HTML version of this report.



Source: CRS using data from BLM, “NPR-A Lease Sale Statistics 1999 to Present,” accessed on September 30, 2025.

Notes: From 1999 to 2010, BLM generally held lease sales every two years. Starting in 2010, BLM held annual lease sales through 2019. BLM has not held any lease sales in the NPR-A since 2019.

Willow Project

In 2016, BLM received nearly \$19 million in bids for leases in the NPR-A, the largest single-year bid amount in more than a decade. The majority of bids were made by ConocoPhillips following the discovery of the Willow field, located in the Bear Tooth Unit in the northeast portion of the NPR-A. ConocoPhillips submitted to BLM a master development plan (MDP) for development of the Willow field, including five drill pads, operation of a central processing facility, and construction of other infrastructure to bring oil and gas to market. Following legal challenges, BLM issued a record of decision (ROD) approving a revised MDP in March 2023, authorizing three drill pads (for background, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10943, *The Willow Project: History and Litigation*). According to BLM, the Willow Project is estimated to produce a total of 576 million barrels of oil and non-gas liquids over 30 years. In August 2025, Alaska’s Department of Revenue projected the Willow Project would generate cumulatively \$5.9 billion in revenue for the federal government through 2053.

Recent Administrative Actions

In 2012, the Obama Administration issued the first IAP addressing management for the entire NPR-A. The plan made available approximately 11.8 million acres of the NPR-A (nearly 52% of the subsurface estate) for oil and gas leasing and closed the remaining roughly 11 million acres to leasing. The plan also created a new Special Area (Peard Bay) and expanded certain existing Special Areas (e.g., Teshekpuk Lake).

In 2017, during the first Trump Administration, then-Secretary Ryan Zinke issued Secretarial Order (S.O.) 3352,

which directed the development of a revised IAP “that strikes an appropriate balance of promoting development while protecting surface resources.” Pursuant to S.O. 3352, BLM issued a revised IAP in 2020, allowing for 18.6 million acres, or 82% of NPR-A’s subsurface estate, to be open to oil and gas leasing. In addition, the IAP adjusted certain boundaries of existing Special Areas (Teshekpuk Lake) and eliminated others (Colville River).

In 2021, the Biden Administration revoked S.O. 3352 and, in 2022, issued a revised IAP that largely reverted management of the NPR-A to the 2012 IAP, including the reinstatement of the Colville River Special Area. In addition, in May 2024, BLM finalized new rules formalizing the management of surface resources within the NPR-A. Among the provisions, the regulations require oil and gas leasing and new infrastructure to conform to the land use allocations and restrictions identified in the new IAP, unless BLM makes subsequent revisions. The rules also establish a *presumption* against leasing and new infrastructure on lands in Special Areas that are allocated as available for those activities.

In June 2025, the Trump Administration announced a proposal to rescind the 2024 regulations in full. Later that month, BLM issued a new environmental assessment (EA) to consider implementation of a new IAP that would revert management of the NPR-A to the approach outlined in the 2020 plan, reopening up to 82% of the NPR-A to leasing.

Legislation and Issues for Congress

Congress has regularly considered legislation and conducted oversight of agency actions impacting management of the NPR-A. Much of this consideration has centered on oil and gas development in the NPR-A. The Trump Administration and other stakeholders have favored increased development in the NPR-A, citing potential economic and national security benefits. In June 2025, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that Northern Alaska (including the NPR-A) contains nearly half of all potential undiscovered, technically recoverable oil and more than a quarter of natural gas on federal lands in the United States. Some stakeholders—including certain Alaska Native groups—contend that such uses will harm the area’s ecosystem and impact subsistence-related activities. Others have questioned whether oil and gas development in the region is feasible given the area’s remoteness and the high cost of production compared with other parts of the country.

On July 4, 2025, the FY2025 budget reconciliation act (P.L. 119-21) was enacted. Section 50105 of that law requires the Secretary to “expeditiously restore and resume oil and gas lease sales” in the NPR-A consistent with the 2020 IAP issued under the first Trump Administration. Specifically, the law requires that the Secretary hold at least five lease sales—of at least 4 million acres each—every other year within 10 years of enactment. It also mandates that the revenues from leases be split evenly between the state and the federal government until FY2034, at which point the State of Alaska would receive 70% of the revenues.

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