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Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Status of Oil and Gas Program

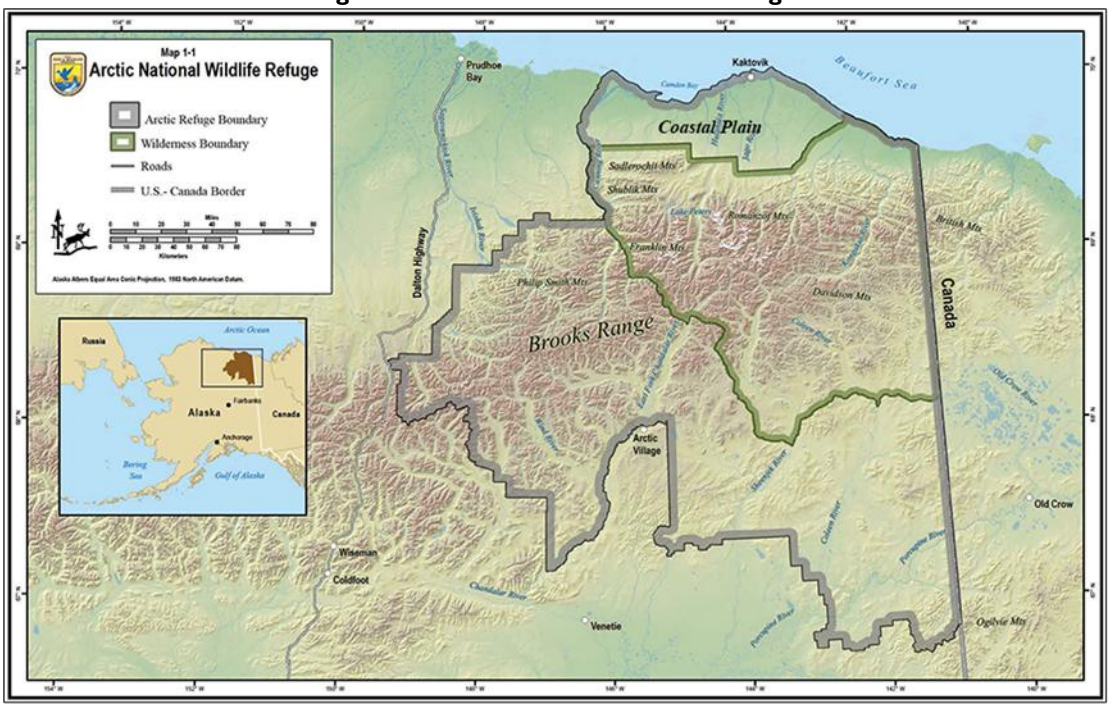
The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR, or the Refuge) comprises 19 million acres in northeast Alaska, administered primarily by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in the Department of the Interior (DOI). ANWR's Coastal Plain—a 1.57-million-acre area in the northern part of the Refuge (**Figure 1**)—is viewed as an onshore oil prospect, with a mean estimate by the U.S. Geological Survey of 7.7 billion barrels of technically recoverable oil on federal lands. (For comparison, total U.S. petroleum consumption in 2025 was about 7.5 billion barrels.) The Refuge also is a center of activity for caribou and other wildlife, with subsistence use by Alaska Natives and critical habitat for polar bears under the Endangered Species Act (ESA; 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544).

P.L. 115-97 established a program for oil and gas leasing and development in ANWR's Coastal Plain. Prior to the law's enactment, Section 1003 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA; P.L. 96-487) had prohibited oil and gas activities in ANWR unless explicitly authorized by an act of Congress. Section 20001 of P.L. 115-97 directed the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), to establish and administer a competitive oil and gas program for ANWR's Coastal Plain and added this program as a stated purpose of the Refuge. The law contained provisions on lease sales, management of the program, minimum royalty rates for ANWR leases, disposition of revenues from the program, rights-of-way, and surface development. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10782, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) Oil and Gas Program: Establishment and Provisions for Leasing and Development*.) During the program's implementation, Congress has continued to debate leasing in the Refuge.

January 2021 Lease Sale

P.L. 115-97 required at least two lease sales in the Coastal Plain by specified dates. Each lease sale was required to offer at least 400,000 acres and to include areas with the highest potential for discovery of hydrocarbons. On January 6, 2021, under the first Trump Administration, BLM held the first oil and gas lease sale under the program. BLM prepared an environmental impact statement (EIS) and record of decision (ROD) for the sale under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA; 42 U.S.C. §§4321 et seq.). The ROD made available for leasing the entire 1.6-million-acre Coastal Plain program area, and BLM offered 22 tracts on 1.1 million acres. The ROD identified more than 60% of the program area as subject to surface occupancy and/or timing restrictions. The sale yielded a total of $14.4 million in high bids. BLM issued leases for nine tracts, covering 437,804 total acres. Seven of the leases went to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA), a state-established public corporation. Two leases went to private companies, both of which later relinquished their leases.

Figure 1. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge



Source: FWS, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan*, April 2015. Edited by CRS.

President Biden's 2021 Executive Order (EO) 13990 directed the Secretary of the Interior to place a "temporary moratorium" on activities in the Coastal Plain leasing program and to conduct a new analysis of the program's potential environmental impacts. DOI prepared a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS), and in September 2023, the Secretary of the Interior canceled the leases held by AIDEA from the 2021 sale, citing "fundamental legal deficiencies" such as failure to analyze a reasonable range of alternatives and to "properly quantify" downstream greenhouse gas emissions.

At the start of his second term in January 2025, President Trump issued EO 14153, rescinding the earlier lease cancellations and ordering agencies to issue authorizations needed for lease development. Separately, in March 2025, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska vacated the 2023 lease cancellations, on the basis that DOI did not obtain a required court order prior to the cancellations. In May 2026, AIDEA authorized funding for seismic testing to identify oil and gas resources on its reinstated leases.

January 2025 Lease Sale

After completing the SEIS under the Biden Administration, DOI issued a ROD on December 9, 2024, and scheduled the second Coastal Plain lease sale for January 10, 2025. For this sale, BLM required stricter environmental protections and offered less acreage than for the first sale. BLM's chosen alternative from the SEIS offered for leasing the minimum allowable acreage under P.L. 115-97 (400,000 acres), with approximately 80% of that acreage subject to restrictions on surface occupancy and/or timing limitations.

On January 8, 2025, DOI announced that no bids had been received for the January 2025 lease sale by the bid deadline. Some observers, including AIDEA, stated that BLM's "strict" terms for the lease sale discouraged participation. Others noted factors that could discourage industry interest, such as the area's distance from existing infrastructure, the expense of developing in Arctic conditions, outdated data on oil and gas resources, and possible litigation related to environmental impacts of development. For further discussion, see CRS Report RL33872, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR): An Overview*. President Trump's EO 14153 rescinded the SEIS that had informed the 2025 sale and reinstated the earlier 2020 ROD and 2019 EIS.

New Lease Sales Required in P.L. 119-21

Section 50104 of P.L. 119-21, the budget reconciliation act enacted in July 2025, required at least four new lease sales for the Coastal Plain by specified dates. The sales are to be conducted in accordance with the ROD that BLM prepared for the 2021 lease sale. As in the earlier sales, BLM must offer at least 400,000 acres at each sale, including those areas with the highest hydrocarbon potential. Through FY2033, 50% of revenues (bonuses, rents, and royalties) from "the oil and gas program and operations ... pursuant to this section" are to be shared with the state of Alaska, as was provided under P.L. 115-97. For FY2034 and thereafter, 70% of the revenues go to Alaska.

June 2026 Lease Sale

On June 5, 2026, BLM held the first required sale under P.L. 119-21, pursuant to a new ROD making the entire 1.6-million-acre Coastal Plain program area available for leasing and adopting the lease stipulations and required operating procedures from the 2020 ROD. BLM offered 58 tracts covering 688,829 acres, and the sale yielded high bids of $3.7 million on five tracts (three won by AIDEA and two by Hex Energy LLC) covering 72,049 acres.

Alaska Native Lands in the Coastal Plain

Some lands in and adjoining the Coastal Plain are owned by Alaska Native corporations. A 1983 agreement provided that oil and gas development would not take place on these Alaska Native lands until Congress approved development of the Coastal Plain. P.L. 115-97 thus opened the possibility of oil and gas development on both the federal lands and the Alaska Native lands. After the law's enactment, Alaska Native corporations applied for permits to conduct seismic testing on their lands, but BLM and FWS did not complete the approval process for the necessary permits.

Issues for Congress

Congress and stakeholders have long debated priorities for energy development and preservation of natural habitat in the Refuge. Broader questions about U.S. energy and climate policy also have shaped the debate. Supporters of oil and gas leasing assert that Coastal Plain development could increase U.S. energy security and bring economic benefits to Alaska Native communities and other Alaska residents. Opponents contend that ANWR leasing could irremediably damage wildlife habitat and subsistence uses, and they express broader concerns about climate impacts of continued investment in fossil fuel extraction and use.

The status of the Coastal Plain oil and gas program may continue to be of interest to Congress. Congress could conduct oversight of the lease sales required in P.L. 119-21—for example, with respect to BLM's sale planning, environmental compliance, or lease terms and restrictions. Congress could consider whether to require additional sales beyond those in P.L. 119-21 or could prohibit leasing. Bids at ANWR lease sales to date have been lower than some earlier predictions, and some previous proposals (e.g., §118 of House-passed H.R. 3055, 116th Congress) would have directed BLM to set minimum auction bids sufficient to produce specified revenue amounts. Bills have also been introduced (e.g., H.R. 3067 and S. 1519, 119th Congress) to repeal the leasing program and designate the Coastal Plain as wilderness under the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. §§1131 et seq.), meaning commercial development would be prohibited.

Congress could consider the management of oil and gas development on awarded leases. P.L. 115-97 set certain conditions, such as limiting production and support facilities to 2,000 acres, which also apply to the lease sales mandated in P.L. 119-21. Congress could consider whether to revisit additional provisions from earlier bills (e.g., H.R. 49 and S. 49 in the 115th Congress) related to seasonal closures, land reclamation, species protection, drilling technologies, employment of Alaska Natives, pipeline construction standards, and other matters.

Laura B. Comay, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

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