WASHINGTON (AP) — Amid the backdrop of soaring oil and gasoline prices, a sharply divided Senate on Wednesday voted to open the ecologically rich Alaska wildlife refuge to oil drilling, delivering a major energy policy win for President Bush.

The Senate, by a 51-49 vote, rejected an attempt by Democrats and GOP moderates to remove a refuge drilling provision from next year's budget, preventing opponents from using a filibuster -- a tactic that has blocked repeated past attempts to open the Alaska refuge to oil companies.

The action, assuming Congress approves on a budget, clears the way for sponsoring drilling in the refuge later this year, drilling supporters said.

The oil industry has sought for more than a decade to get access to what is believed to be billions of barrels of oil beneath the 1.5 million-acre coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the northern eastern corner of Alaska.

Environmentalists have fought such development and argued that despite improve environmental controls a web of pipelines and drilling platforms would harm calving caribou, polar bears and millions of migratory birds that use the coastal plain.

Bush has called tapping the reserve's oil a critical part of the nation's energy security and a way to reduce America's reliance on imported oil, which account for more than half of the 20 million barrels of crude sold daily. The Alaska refuge could supply as much as 1 million barrels a day at peak production, drilling supporters said.

"We won't see this oil for 10 years. It will have minimal impact," argued Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Washington, a co-sponsor of the amendment that would have stripped the refuge provision from the budget document, it's "foolish to say oil development and a wildlife refuge can coexist," she said.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, argued that more oil would be saved if Congress enacted an energy policy focusing on conservation, more efficient cars and trucks and increased reliance on renewable fuels and expanded oil development in the deep-water Gulf where there are significant reserves.

"The fact is (drilling in ANWR) is going to be destructive," said Kerry.

But drilling proponents argue that modern drilling technology can safeguard the refuge and still tap the likely -- though not yet certain -- 10.4 billion barrels of crude in the refuge.

"Some people say we ought to conserve more. They say we ought to conserve instead of producing this oil," said Sen. Pete Domenici, R-New Mexico, "But we need to do everything. We have to conserve and produce where we can."

The vote Wednesday contrasted with the last time the Senate took up the ANWR drilling issue two years ago. Then, in an attempt to include it in the budget was defeated. But drilling supporters gained strength last November when Republicans picked up three additional seats, all senators who favored drilling in the refuge.

Opponents of drilling complained that Republicans this time were trying "an end run" by attaching the refuge provisions to the budget, a tactic that would allow the measure to pass with a majority vote.

"It's the only way around a filibuster which requires 60 votes to overcome, countered Stevens.

The 19-million-acre refuge was set aside for protection by President Eisenhower in 1960, but Congress in 1980 said its 1.5 million acre coastal plain could be opened to oil development if Congress specifically authorizes it.

Bush, who has urged Congress repeatedly to allow oil companies to tap the refuge's crude, said Wednesday it's "a way to get some additional reserves here at home on the books."

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Experts Conclude Oil Drilling Has Hurt Alaska's North Slope

By ANDREW C. REVKIN (NYT) 948 words

Even though oil companies have greatly improved practices in the Arctic, three decades of drilling along Alaska's North Slope have produced a steady accumulation of harmful environmental and social effects that will probably grow as exploration expands, a panel of experts has concluded.

Some of the problems could last for centuries, the experts said in a report yesterday, both because environmental damage does not heal easily in the area's harsh climate and because it is uneconomical to remove structures or restore damaged areas once drilling is over.

The report, produced by the National Research Council, was immediately hailed by opponents of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which lies east of established oil fields and is the only part of America's only stretch of Arctic coastline that for now is off limits to drilling. Advocates of drilling called it biased. Administration officials said improved techniques would lessen the environmental impact of future drilling.

The council, the research arm of the National Academies, an independent advisory body on science, produced the report at the request of Republican lawmakers supporting oil drilling in the Arctic refuge. (The report can be found on the Web at nase.edu.)

President Bush and many Republicans in Congress and Alaska lawmakers from both parties are pushing this year for legislation that would open the coastal plain of the refuge to development.

The panel made no judgment on whether the environmental costs of Arctic oil development outweighed the economic benefits of wells that have, on average, supplied about 20 percent of America's domestic production since 1977 and provided cash to poor native communities.

The North Slope is a windswept, Minnesota-size region, bereft of trees but brimming with wildlife - that runs from the peaks of the Brooks Range north to the Arctic Ocean. In 1964, huge oil reserves were discovered in Prudhoe Bay, about 200 miles inland, and a web of pipelines, roads, power lines, and faint trails left by ground-thumping seismic survey teams has spread outward ever since.

The report said some of the environmental problems result from lack of money to restore damaged ecosystems, from ill-defined layers of local and federal regulations and from the fact that the area is home to rare wildlife.

The committee judged it unlikely that most disturbed habitat on the North Slope would ever be restored. "Natural recovery in the Arctic is very slow, because of the cold, so the effects of abandoned structures and unrecovered landscapes could persist for centuries and accumulate," the report said.

A particular problem was the lack of specific state or federal rules requiring cleanup of some degraded areas, said the chairman of the expert panel, Dr. Gordon H. Orians, a professor emeritus of zoology at the University of Washington in Seattle.
telephone news conference. "Unless this is improved substantially," he said, "undesirable effects in the future are likely to be greater."

The report's authors and officials from the research council defended the analysis, noting that the panel included several experts who worked for oil companies along with scientists from academia, one environmental group (the Natural Resources Defense Council), and Alaskan organizations. The panel endorsed the report unanimously, Dr. Oriens said.

Critics of drilling, particularly in the refuge, welcomed the report. "It projects a chilling picture of a diminished landscape if the Bush administration's plans are realized," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, senior vice president for conservation programs at the National Wildlife Federation, a private conservation group.

Industry officials and some lawmakers supporting drilling focused on the report's sections describing the economic benefits of oil extraction cited by native communities and the environmental benefits of advanced oil-exploration techniques.

The panel noted that the oil industry has made great strides in cutting its "footprint" on the fragile Arctic landscape and preventing oil spills.

But it concluded that the impacts were far-reaching nonetheless: from specific harms like a drop in reproduction in some nesting birds and a rise in diabetes in native communities to an erosion of the spiritual and aesthetic values of the barren yet majestic region.

It also said the sharp warming of the climate in the Arctic in recent decades could disrupt some techniques with which companies have avoided some harm to the landscape, including the building of temporary ice roads in winter instead of permanent gravel tracks.

The lack of specific federal or state rules dealing with abandoned facilities on the tundra has resulted in restoration of fewer than 1 percent of the dormant drilling pads, roads, or other abandoned, gravel-covered areas in the region, the experts said.

"Roads, pads, pipelines, seismic-vehicle tracks, and transmission lines; air, ground, and vessel traffic; drilling activities; landfills, housing, processing facilities, and other industrial infrastructure have reduced opportunities for solitude and have compromised wild-land and scenic values over large areas," it said. "The structures and activities also violate the spirit of the land, a value that is reported by some Alaska Natives to be central to their culture."

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