

**The New York Times** | <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/26/climate/biden-alaska-drilling.html>

# ***Biden Administration Defends Huge Alaska Oil Drilling Project***

The administration says the country must pivot away from fossil fuels but backed a project set to produce more than 100,000 barrels of oil each day for 30 years.



By Lisa Friedman

May 26, 2021

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration is defending a huge Trump-era oil and gas project in the North Slope of Alaska designed to produce more than 100,000 barrels of oil a day for the next 30 years, despite President Biden's pledge to pivot the country away from fossil fuels.

The multibillion-dollar plan from ConocoPhillips to drill in part of the National Petroleum Reserve was approved by the Trump administration late last year. Environmental groups sued, arguing that the federal government failed to take into account the impact that drilling would have on fragile wildlife and that burning the oil would have on global warming.

The project, known as Willow, set up a choice for the Biden administration: decline to defend oil drilling and hinder a lucrative project that conflicts with its climate policy or support a federal decision backed by the state of Alaska, some tribal nations, unions and key officials, including Lisa Murkowski, a moderate Republican senator seen as a potential ally of the administration in an evenly split Senate.

On Wednesday, the administration filed a brief in U.S. District Court for Alaska, defending the Trump administration decision to greenlight the Willow project.

In a statement, the Interior Department said that the Trump administration decision complied with the environmental rules in place at the time and that the plaintiffs did not challenge the approval "within the time limitations associated with environmental review projects" for the National Petroleum Reserve.

The administration declined to explain how its position on the Willow project aligns with its climate change policies. But in its court filing, the government said the Trump administration adequately considered Willow's impacts on fish, caribou and polar bear habitat. It also upheld the method used by the prior administration to account for the greenhouse gas emissions generated by the project.

“Conoco does have valid lease rights,” the filing states, noting that under law the company is entitled to develop its leases “subject to reasonable regulation.”

In a paradox worthy of Kafka, ConocoPhillips plans to install “chillers” into the permafrost — which is fast melting because of climate change — to keep it solid enough to support the equipment to drill for oil, the burning of which will continue to worsen ice melt.

Over the past 60 years, Alaska has warmed more than twice as fast as the rest of the United States. Arctic ecosystems are in disarray, sea ice is disappearing, sea levels are rising and the ground is thawing.

A federal court halted construction in February while the case is pending. The court could ultimately still decide against the project, its critics said. But oil and gas industry officials and members of Alaska’s congressional delegation, some of whom personally appealed to President Biden this week, said they believed the administration’s support would help it proceed.

#### **Most Read Climate and Environment Stories**

- Biden Administration Defends Huge Alaska Oil Drilling Project
- A renewable energy ‘breakthrough’
- A Dutch court rules that Shell must step up its climate change efforts.
- Brazil’s Bid to Outsource Amazon Conservation Finds Few Takers
- E.P.A. to Modify Trump-Era Limits on States’ Ability to Oppose Energy Projects

Senator Dan Sullivan, Republican of Alaska, called the project a “big, big deal for Alaska, a big deal in my view for America” when speaking with reporters earlier this week. He said he raised the Willow project directly with President Biden when he and other members of the Alaska delegation went to the White House on Monday for the signing of a tourism bill allowing cruise ships to visit Alaska.

“He said he’d look into it and get back to us,” Mr. Sullivan told reporters after that White House meeting.

The decision comes just days after the International Energy Agency, the world’s top energy body, warned that governments must stop investing in new fossil fuel projects if they want to keep the increase in average global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius, compared to preindustrial levels. That’s the threshold beyond which scientists say the Earth will experience irreversible damage.

It also stands in stark contrast to Mr. Biden’s pledge to cut United States emissions about in half by 2030, replace fossil fuels with solar, wind and other renewable energy and enhance protections for public lands and waters.

“This is especially disappointing coming from a president who promised to do better,” said Sigiñic Maupin, executive director of Sovereign Inupiat for a Living Arctic in Alaska.

Kristen Miller, acting director of the Alaska Wilderness League, said the burning of oil produced by the Willow project over its lifetime would create nearly 260 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions — about the equivalent of what is produced by 66 coal-fired power plants. But, she argued, the infrastructure also will lead to new oil and gas projects in the region.

“Not only does the project in itself have significant and long-lasting climate problems, it’s setting the stage for more emissions in the future,” Ms. Miller said.

Mr. Biden has taken significant steps to limit oil and gas development in the United States. One of his first acts as president was to temporarily freeze new oil and gas leases on public lands and offshore waters. He also placed a temporary moratorium on oil and gas drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which is still in place.

The Willow project is in the northeastern portion of the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska, an area the federal government set aside for oil and gas development. The initial discovery of oil in the Willow area was made by ConocoPhillips Alaska in 2017, and the company has said the project is expected to create more than 1,000 jobs during peak construction, and more than 400 permanent jobs.

In October, David Bernhardt, Mr. Trump’s secretary of the Interior Department, approved a plan for the company to drill up to three sites and build about 37 miles of gravel roads, at least one airstrip, 386 miles of pipelines and an oil processing facility to support that drilling.

Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak, an environmental activist and a resident of the nearby village Nuiqsut, said she believed the project would divert the normal migration of caribou, hurting the community’s ability to feed families.

“It’s going to be very devastating for our way of life,” Ms. Ahtuanguaruak said. And, she added, communities like hers are already suffering the consequences of air pollution from other oil and gas projects as well as the impacts of climate change.

An administration that has made climate action a priority needs “to stand up to their words, not cave to the pressures of industry,” she said.

Other Alaska Native groups, however, said they welcomed the jobs as well as the state and local revenue expected to be generated by the project. In an April letter to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, George Edwardson, president of the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, called oil drilling “critical to the economic survival of the eight Inupiat villages that call this region home” and said the Willow project had the group’s “strong support.”

“Alaska’s oil and gas industry provides much-needed jobs for our people, tax revenue to support our schools and health clinics, and support for basic public services,” he wrote.

Lisa Friedman reports on federal climate and environmental policy from Washington. She has broken multiple stories about the Trump administration’s efforts to repeal climate change regulations and limit the use of science in policymaking. @LFFriedman