

Trump opens more Arctic land for U.S. oil drilling

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The Trump plan allows leasing in the largest lake in Arctic Alaska which has been off-limits for decades

Washington, January 6 (RHC)-- U.S. President Donald Trump's administration says it has finalized its plan to open up vast areas of once-protected Arctic Alaska territory to oil development. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management released its plan for the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A), a 23 million-acre (9.3 million-hectare) swath of land on the western North Slope. The record, signed by Interior

Secretary David Bernhardt on December 21, allows lease sales to proceed under relaxed standards.

The decision is one of a number of pro-drilling actions taken by the Trump administration in its final days. The bureau is auctioning off drilling rights in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) on the eastern North Slope.

The plan allows oil development on about 80 percent of the reserve. Under rules set by former President Barack Obama, about half of the reserve was available for leasing, with the other half protected for environmental and indigenous reasons. The Trump plan allows leasing in the vast Teshekpuk Lake, the largest lake in Arctic Alaska and a haven for migrating birds and wildlife. Teshekpuk Lake has been off-limits to leasing since the Reagan administration.

“We are expanding access to our nation’s great energy potential and providing for economic opportunities and job creation for both Alaska Natives and our nation,” said Casey Hammond, the principal deputy secretary for the Department of the Interior.

It is unclear whether making this land available will boost Alaskan oil production, which peaked more than 30 years ago at two million barrels per day (bpd). The state now produces roughly 500,000 bpd of crude.

The NPR-A decision got a swift response from environmentalists who have already sued to overturn the plan. “On its way out the door, this administration is sticking to its blunt and destructive approach to management solely for oil development,” David Krause, an assistant Alaska director for The Wilderness Society, said in a statement.

The latest decision comes on the heels of the Trump administration’s plans to auction oil drilling rights in the ANWR territory. While the auction is scheduled for Wednesday, January 6, companies were allowed to submit bids starting on Monday.

Last month, native Alaskans and environmental groups asked a federal court to block the Trump administration from selling these rights.

The intervention could be critical in ensuring President-elect Joe Biden is able to fulfil his campaign promise to protect the refuge. Once the Trump administration conducts the auction, any formally issued leases become legal contracts with the federal government that would be difficult for the Biden administration to revoke.

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