



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Statement of Senator Gaylord Nelson
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For the past decade the nation has bungled along without an energy plan worthy of the name and without the presidential leadership to create one.

Today, the Department of Energy is expected to present the President with a set of energy options. Indications are that these recommendations will fall far short of the bold steps the President must take to reduce our dependence on oil. We fully expect that the President will use the Persian Gulf confrontation as an excuse to call for the exploration and development of some of the rarest and most fragile of our nation's vanishing wildlands.

At the top of the list will be the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. President Bush has already strongly endorsed legislation to open the refuge, a course of action firmly opposed by the conservation community. Even if oil is found there, the hoped-for amount of 3.2 billion barrels would not begin to compensate for the degradation of this remarkable ecosystem with its vast collection of wildlife.

More than 200 species of wildlife use the coastal plain, including grizzly bears, moose, wolves, wolverines, and millions of birds. Perhaps most spectacular is the 180,000-member Porcupine Caribou herd that migrates several hundred miles each spring to calving grounds on the coastal plain -- a process that has gone on for thousands of years.

Oil from this refuge -- if it can be found at all -- would probably provide just two percent of U.S. consumption over the life of the field. We could save more than twice

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as much oil by increasing automobile fuel efficiency standards by two miles per gallon during the next ten years. No new technology is required - just some political will.

Now the President will certainly say that drilling in the refuge will somehow make the U.S. more "secure." But let's look at that more closely. The fact is that the U.S., which holds only four percent of the world's oil reserves, will always be subject to world price swings and disruptions of oil supplies. Unless, of course, we follow a national energy strategy that reduces our dependence on *all* oil, not just imported oil.

Why doesn't the administration start with energy conservation instead of wholesale drilling wherever a barrel of oil might be found? In 1985, the Department of Energy stated that energy conservation "has proven to be the most expeditious way to reduce the need for new or imported energy resources; and in fact it now contributes more to balancing our national energy ledger than does any single fuel source." Still, five years later the administration has yet to present a well designed energy conservation plan.

It should at all times be kept in mind that this refuge is not just a rare place, it is unique - there is no other like it. The Interior Department's 1002 Report states:

"The Arctic Refuge is the only conservation system unit that protects, in an undisturbed condition, a complete spectrum of the various Arctic ecosystems in North America. . . the coastal plain is the most biologically productive part of the Arctic Refuge for wildlife and is the center of wildlife activity on the refuge."

In 1977 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated the case even more eloquently when it successfully opposed the routing of a gas pipe-line across the refuge stating:

"such a crossing is clearly not compatible with the basic purpose of the Arctic Range . . . we do not believe that the long-term national interest would be served by committing this unique area to development for short-term benefits when its outstanding values for wildlife and wilderness would be forever lost . . . such activity would destroy wilderness values and irretrievably disrupt many wildlife populations . . . this Arctic Range is the last unspoiled area of its kind in the entire Northern Hemisphere."



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There are, after all, many landscapes, many wildlife habitats, many undisturbed natural areas far more valuable to mankind than any commodities that may be extracted from them. This arctic coastal plain is such a place. Isn't it time we asked ourselves: Are there any places in our land that are inviolate? Is there anything we wouldn't sell? Is there some place, some time when we are prepared to say "no more ... this is as far as we will go." Surely there must be such a place. If not the arctic coastal plain, where is it?

President Bush should answer that question before he orders the invasion of this remarkable place by oil rigs, roads, trucks, air strips and thousands of workers.

Three years ago the alarmists were claiming we had to drill in the coastal plain because our national security was at risk. If, indeed, the security of the nation turned on finding a seven-month supply of oil to be used over a 30-year period then the battle is already lost.

Now the drilling enthusiasts are developing an elaborate Saddam Hussein scenario. Don't be surprised if you see Saddam tossed into the fray as the all-purpose rationale for drilling in the Arctic Refuge, wilderness areas and sensitive coastal ecosystems.

This, of course, is nonsense. The only certain way to ensure our energy future is to reduce our dependence on oil. And that is the goal of the organizations before you today. In 1991, one of our highest priorities will be energy efficiency to protect our natural resources. We think Americans will support that goal, and we hope President Bush will join us.

Senator Gaylord Nelson is counselor to The Wilderness Society, a nonprofit conservation organization with more than 400,000 members. Nelson founded Earth Day, in 1970.

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