



NEWS

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Interior Finalizes Plan for NW National Petroleum-Alaska, Designates More than 100,000 acres as Kasegaluk Lagoon Special Area

(Washington) - Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton today signed a document that finalizes the Bureau of Land Management's plan for managing 8.8 million acres of public land in the Northwest portion of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. In signing the document, known as a Record of Decision, Norton said the BLM's management plan "will help meet America's need for environmentally sound energy development as directed by the President's National Energy Plan."

The Secretary's decision document slightly modifies the BLM's preferred management alternative, which the Bureau described in a final Environmental Impact Statement on the management plan. The impact statement, prepared as part of President Bush's National Energy Policy, was published last month.

Under its management plan, the BLM will make 7.23 million acres of the 8.8 million Northwest portion acres available for energy leasing and will defer 1.57 million acres from leasing for 10 years. All energy leases will be subject to strict environmental standards. In addition, the plan includes provisions to protect water quality, vegetation, wetlands, fish and wildlife habitats, and subsistence uses. This plan was the result of extensive consultations with Alaskans.

"With America's dependence on foreign oil growing each year, energy from the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska can help in the long term to increase our domestic energy production and stabilize prices," Secretary Norton said. "This plan will help produce energy in an environmentally responsible manner with the best available technology, while protecting the important biological, subsistence and cultural values found in this area."

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska has between 5.9 and 13.2 billion barrels of technically recoverable oil with a mean estimate of 9.3 billion barrels.

President Harding created the Naval Petroleum Reserve Number 4 in 1923. In 1976, BLM assumed management responsibility for the area and the name was changed to the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. In 1980, Congress instructed the Secretary to undertake "an expeditious program of competitive leasing of oil and gas" in the Reserve. Throughout the past two years the Bureau of Land Management has used various studies to develop the Northwest Plan for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

"With today's signing, we can continue to access these vital reserves and in doing so we can increase our national security, provide more stable energy prices for America's families, reduce our dependency on foreign oil and create new jobs in America," Secretary Norton said.

Today, as part of the Record of Decision, the Secretary designated 102,000 acres as the Kasegaluk Lagoon Special Area. "This area is important for migratory birds and marine mammals and features marine tidal flats that are rare on the North Slope. I concur with BLM's recommendation for this area and see no reason to wait," Secretary Norton said.

BLM will include "no surface occupancy" restrictions that prohibit permanent structures and contain other protective stipulations on any leases issued in this special area.

In a related development, BLM announced its intention to hold a lease sale for selected tracts in the northwest corner of the petroleum reserve on June 2, 2004. The agency is accepting additional expressions of interest from industry through Feb. 9.

The plan, detailed in the Final Northwest National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Integrated Activity Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement, includes a variety of restrictions and designations designed to protect water quality, vegetation, wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat, subsistence uses and scenic/recreational values. Key provisions under the plan include the following:

- Defer leasing on about 1.5 million acres (17 percent of the planning area) near Wainwright for the next 10 years
- Provide no surface occupancy stipulations along coastal areas, in deep-water lakes, along key rivers (16 percent of the planning area), and in the Kasegaluk Lagoon Special Area
- Designate special study areas of more than half a million acres each for Pacific black brandt and caribou
- Conduct area wide studies on habitat for Spectacled and Steller's eiders (both listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act) and yellow-billed loons
- Implement stipulations to minimize loss of raptor foraging habitat within the existing Colville River Special Area

Other stipulations and required operating procedures establish restrictions and guidance that apply to waste prevention and spills, water use, winter overland moves and seismic activity, exploratory drilling, aircraft use and subsistence consultation.

The Secretary made the following changes to the agency's preferred alternative:

- In response to a resolution passed by BLM's Alaska Resource Advisory Council, leasing will be deferred in the Colville River Special Area until the combined Southern National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska plan and Colville River management plans are complete.
- Minor changes to some of the stipulations were made to help clarify the intent more clearly or to add phrases that were accidentally deleted during the planning process.
- A required operating procedure was added to address cultural/paleontological resources.
- At the request of the North Slope Borough, a setback stipulation of one-half mile was added for Naklavik Creek.

The plan, released in December 2003, can be read on the Internet through the BLM home page, www.blm.gov/ak.