



**FORUM:** UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

**QUESTION OF:** THE QUESTION OF AUTHORIZING THE WILLOW PROJECT AND EVALUATING ITS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

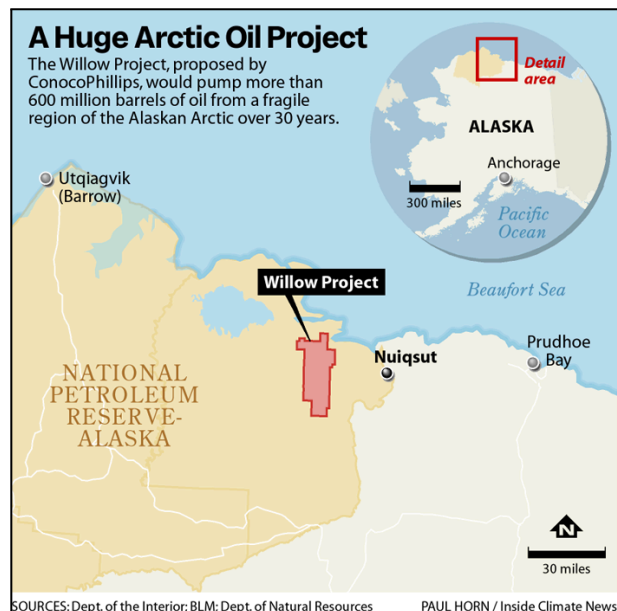
## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Environment Programme is responsible for engaging in solutions to problems that raise environmental concerns. It is crucial to maintain healthy, stable and appropriate environmental conditions to live a better life. It is every individual's responsibility to contribute to the environmental movements.

The Willow Project is an oil drilling project that was planned by ConocoPhillips, a multinational fossil fuel company. The Willow Project is not the first time that the company has taken up drilling projects. The

Houston-based company has been drilling in Alaska for many years. It manages a vast amount, *about 40,000 mi<sup>2</sup>*, of the NPR (National Petroleum Reserve) in Alaska that is owned by the state. The Willow Project, whose aim is to construct about five drill pads that will amount to about 250 oil wells, also takes place on NPR-A (National Petroleum Reserve of Alaska) located on the North Slope. It's located in the BearTooth Unit West of Alpine and is about 50 km away from the Arctic Ocean. As the home to

half a million caribou and a crucial nesting ground for millions of migratory birds, the NPR-A is of major ecological significance. The reserve also happens to be the single-largest tract of undisturbed public land in the country. Therefore, in a corner of Alaska that's already suffering from coastal erosion, melting sea ice, and thawing permafrost; an environmentally





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threatening project that focuses on the extraction of oil, such as the Willow Project will just augment the problems faced.

Certain Alaska Native communities are divided as a result of the decision. The village chiefs of Nuiqsut, the one nearest to the project, have opposed Willow through speech, claiming that it will jeopardize subsistence hunting and public health. Other native groups from Alaska also shared their concerns about the impact that the Willow Project will have. *“The true cost of the Willow Project is to the land and to animals and people forced to breathe polluted air and drink polluted water;”* said a statement issued Monday by Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic, a Native-led environmental group. *“While out-of-state executives take in record profits, local residents are left to contend with the detrimental impacts of being surrounded by massive drilling operations.”* (Weisbrod) Yet, the development has received support from numerous other Native groups.

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

### **NPR-A:**

Abbreviation of *National Petroleum Reserve of Alaska*. It is the location where the Willow Project takes place. It is a federally owned parcel of land that is on Alaska’s north slope. ConocoPhillips, the operator company of the Willow Project, owns and is responsible for the management of a part of the NPR-A

### **The Bureau of Land Management:**

It is the federal agency that is in charge of the approval of this project. Also may be seen as BLM, its abbreviation.

### **ConocoPhillips:**

It is a multinational, American, Houston-based corporation that has expertise in hydrocarbon exploration and extraction. It is the company that will operate the Willow Project.

### **Earthjustice:**

A nonprofit organization in the United States dedicated to public interest, more specifically environmental issues, filed a lawsuit against the Willow Project on March 14, 2023.



**Pay:**

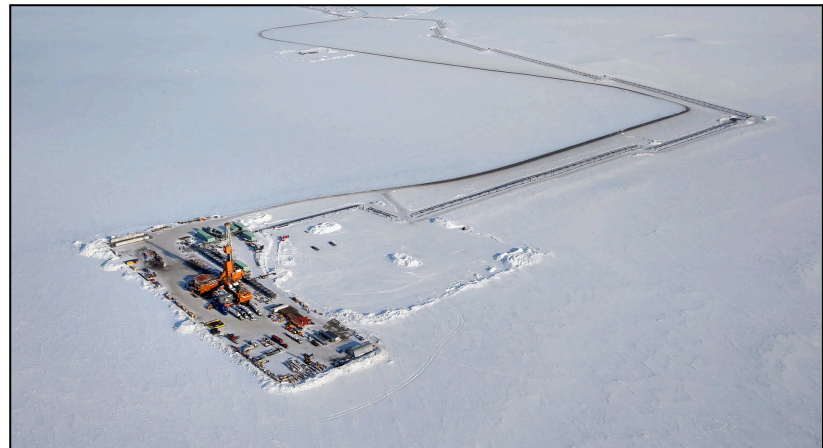
A phrase used in mining for hydrocarbons. It refers to a section of a reservoir that has hydrocarbons that may be profitably extracted.

**Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act:**

The settlement was enacted into law on December 18, 1971, by President Richard Nixon, and at the time it was the largest land claims settlement in American history. It was designed to promote economic growth throughout Alaska and address long-standing disputes about indigenous land claims in the state. Its significance in the Willow Project is because it was considered in the decision-making process of the Bureau of Land Management whether to allow the Willow Project or not.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The history of The Willow Project goes back to 1999 when the multinational company ConocoPhillips first purchased the leases of the land parcel that the project is planned to take place in which is located in the BearTooth Unit. Oil was



discovered in this area in Alpines, Alaska in 2016. It is entirely on the Arctic coastal plain and positioned on the Arctic coastal tundra, less than *30 miles (48 km)* from the Arctic Ocean. This is permafrost tundra with *5%* of freshwater and *94%* of wetlands. *(U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management. October 2020)*

In the final year when the 44th president was still administrating, in 2016, ConocoPhillips experimented with two wells and encountered significant pay. The project was given its name Willow





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after this drilling process. Two years after the first time the company worked on this area when they experimented, ConocoPhillips appraised greater ownership of the land and added new wells to the area. ConocoPhillips formally requested authorization from the *Bureau of Land Management* in May 2018 to develop the Willow prospect. This included building and running five drill pads, each with 50 oil wells, for a total of 250 oil wells, as well as access and infield roads, airstrips, pipelines, a gravel mine, and a temporary island to enable the delivery of modules by sealift barges. 15 months after this request of the company, the Bureau of Land Management responded with the publication of a draft of a master plan that was put together through consultation with over 10 local tribes and corporations that act according to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Exactly 1 year after the publication of the draft, the Bureau of Land Management approved ConocoPhillips' request.

In August 2021, the BLM permission for the Willow project got challenged by the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska, showing following causes as justification:

- *Improperly excluded analysis of foreign greenhouse gas emissions*
- *Improperly screened out alternatives from detailed analysis based on the Bureau of Land Management's misunderstanding of leaseholders' rights*
- *Failed to give due consideration to the requirement in the National Petroleum Reserve of Alaska to afford 'maximum protection' to significant surface values in the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area"*

(2023 Record of Decision - Willow Master Development Plan Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement)

[https://eplanning.blm.gov/public\\_projects/109410/200258032/20075029/250081211/2023%20Willow%20MDP%20Record%20of%20Decision.pdf](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/109410/200258032/20075029/250081211/2023%20Willow%20MDP%20Record%20of%20Decision.pdf)

Public and media interest in the Willow Project rose as a final decision approached, with over 2.4 million people signing a petition pleading with President Biden to "say no to the Willow Project" following extensive exposure on TikTok. Despite all the pressure, the Biden administration approved the project on March 13, 2023, and got responses from environmental organizations stating that they plan to sue.



## CURRENT SITUATION

The approval of a new source of carbon pollution, according to activists, goes against President Joe Biden's pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 and move the country toward renewable energy. "Carbon bomb" is how some activists have described the project.



*The Natural Resources*

*Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace,* and other parties filed a second complaint on the same day, requesting that the federal Alaska court revoke the approval. Since construction can only be done in the winter, Conoco began building the ice road right once. In April, an appeals court rejected an injunction. During a White House press conference in August, a college student from Gen-Z for Change demonstrated against the approval; the video of the protest received 10 million views.

This September Biden did not cancel the oil and gas lease for the Willow Project but did cancel it for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Judge Sharon Gleason of the U.S. The District Court upheld the Biden administration's clearance of the Willow project on November 9, 2023, rejecting arguments made by environmentalists and an Iñupiat group against construction. One of the groups filing the action, Earthjustice, has said that it will be appealing the ruling.

## MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

### Bureau of Land Management

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees the management of federal lands in the United States. It is an organization under the





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Department of the Interior. It is headquartered in Washington D.C. It is responsible for the final decision of the project. Its decision to accept the project had a lot of negative effects in the media.

<https://www.blm.gov/>

## Earthjustice

*“Because the earth needs a good lawyer.”*

It was founded in 1971 with the name *“Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund”* originally. It is a US-based nonprofit public interest group that focuses on environmental litigation. Headquartered in San Francisco, they have an international program, a communications team, and a policy and legislation team in Washington, D.C., along with 14 regional offices across the United States. It was one of the few organizations to have openly filed a lawsuit against ConocoPhillips regarding the Willow Project.

<https://earthjustice.org/>



## USEFUL LINKS

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/14032023/willow-conocophillips-arctic-oil-biden/>

[https://eplanning.blm.gov/public\\_projects/109410/200258032/20029172/250035373/2020-10-27\\_ROD\\_508.pdf](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/109410/200258032/20029172/250035373/2020-10-27_ROD_508.pdf)

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/15/politics/willow-project-alaska-lawsuits-climate/index.htm>





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<https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/climatechange/2023/05/10/rethinking-the-willow-project-did-blm-have-other-options/#:~:text=It%20will%20also%20worsen%20global,dioxide%2Dequivalent%20over%20its%20lifetime.>

<https://www.npr.org/2023/11/09/1212016595/judge-rules-willow-oil-project-in-alaskas-arctic-can-proceed>

<https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/oil-and-gas/about/alaska/NPR-A>

<https://www.nrdc.org/stories/why-willow-project-bad-idea>