Anwr Oil Drilling Essay, Research Paper

Destruction of the Environment or Over-Zealous Conservation?

Introduction:

With the 2000 Presidential election looming and both candidates in a near deadlock, Al Gore and George W. Bush have been forced to take stands on some very tough issues that affect the lives of everyday Americans. One of these decisions is what to do about the recent escalating crude oil prices. Many people believe that the candidates should promise to open up the strategic crude oil reserve until the prices stabilize. Others believe that the candidates should promise to negotiate with members of the OPEC bloc in an effort to stabilize prices. Many others believe that the candidates should look within the country, and begin oil drilling in untapped regions of the country such as Alaska. There are several benefits to opening additional wells in the Alaskan region, such as new jobs for American workers, cheaper crude oil, and less dependency upon an often unstable Middle Eastern region. These people believe that because there are already wells drilled in Alaskan regions with similar environmental conditions as the region in question, that there will be no harmful affects to begin drilling.

Obviously there are many dissenters of this opinion who believe that by drilling in regions such as Alaska, we risk environmental disasters such as the Exxon Valdez, regardless if we drill in the ocean, or if we drill on land. These people believe that by drilling on land, we will destroy the permafrost that the oil derricks will be set upon permanently as well as well as risk the overall contamination of the environment. If we decide to drill into the ocean floor, we risk the chance of an oil pipe bursting, and risk an environmental disaster even worse than the Exxon Valdez incident. In addition, there are also several solutions to the increase in crude oil prices that do not involve risking the environmental region of Alaska.

Alaskan Region in Question

The area primarily in question regarding oil drilling in the Alaskan region is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. According to the ANWR webpage:

“The lands protected by the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge include 19 million acres in the northeast corner of Alaska. The entire refuge lies north of the Arctic Circle and 1,300 miles south of the North Pole. The Coastal Plain area, [the area where the most crude oil is believed to be contained] compromising of 1.5 million acres on the northern edge of ANWR, is bordered on the north by the Beaufort Sea, on the east by the U.S. Canadian border, and on the west by the Canning River…At its widest points, the Coastal Plain is about 100 miles across and about 30 miles deep and covers an area slightly larger than the state of Delaware. Along the coastal area, the plain is an almost featureless expanse, barren and dotted with thousands of unconnected small ponds; the area to the south becomes gently rolling, treeless hills which merge into foothills and then into the northern edges of the Brooks Range…If ANWR were a state, it would be larger than 10 other states. ” (Background What…).

It is believed that the Coastal Region of the ANWR alone could produce a staggering amount of oil. A study conducted by the Department of the Interior in 1987 found that, “”in-place resources” range from 4.8 billion to 29.4 billion barrels of oil…recoverable oil estimates range from 600 million barrels at the low end to 9.2 billion barrels at the high end” (Background How…).

The Need for Additional Sources of Domestic Crude Oil

What is the desperate need for additional source of crude oil within the United States that one would even consider drilling in this refuge? Unless a person has been living under a rock for the past year and a half, they have noticed the sudden increase and continual increase of gasoline prices when they go to fill their car. This stems from the period of irrationally cheap gasoline prices that we encountered only a short few years before this. The new wave of OPEC leaders are, according to the Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff, “Harvard-education business executive who have all been schooled in global economics.” These leaders recognize the dependency of the United States and the rest of the world upon crude oil and will charge whatever the demand curve will allow (ANWR Oil Amour).

In addition to threats by new leaders of OPEC, members of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge state that, “Nearly 58% of oil used in the United States is imported from foreign countries” (ANWR.org). This creates an unprecedented dependence on crude oil imports. In fact, according to the ANWR, we export over 10.5 million barrels of oil a day, including a staggering 1.4 million from Saudi Arabia alone. The ANWR argues that by opening up the coastal area of the region, it could produce 16 billion barrels of recoverable oil the equivalent of 30 years of Saudi Arabia oil (Worried About Fuel Prices?). Thus the need and desire for internal oil production is evident.

History and Description of ANWR

The ANWR was originally created in the late 1950’s by President Eisenhower. Originally only 8 million acres of land were set aside. In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act was passed which increased the amount of protected land to 19 million acres. The original intention of the ANWR was for the protection of the Porcupine Caribou herd’s calving grounds (History of the ANWR). However, the Coastal Area of the Alaskan region detailed above, was not protected by this act pending further study of the area’s natural petroleum reserves. The act stated that the region could potentially be drilled into with government permission. This act was the first in which particular lands could be excluded from environmental protection if those particular lands could be excluded in the interest of national security (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). From the 1980 passing of ANILCA, Republicans in Congress have been eager to overthrow the act and begin drilling in the area. However, a Democratic majority in the Legislature, and eventually the Democratic control of the Executive Offices have prevented the Coastal Area from being freed up for oil drilling. The Oil Industry has been even more pressing of the issue because Prudhoe Bay’s, North America’s largest oil field, oil reserves have been sharply declining (Alaska Oil Drilling).

Reasons for the Opening of the Coastal Region

By opening on the Coastal Region of the ANWR, the United States would be far less dependent on crude oil from other countries. As stated above, the region is capable of producing the same amount of oil as Saudi Arabia for the next 30 years. In addition, by opening the region, up to 735,000 American jobs would be created. The ANWR also argues that only 8% of the lands protected by the ANWR and ANILCA would be considered for exploration, leaving 92% or nearly 17.5 million acres remaining for environmental protection. Thus, experts argue that environmental issues aside, there is absolutely no reason why the ANWR Coastal Region should not be opened for exploration (Top 10…).

Environmental Issues

Obviously the ANWR and ANILCA would have never been passed if there were not environmental issues to consider. Both acts were passed in the hopes of preserving America’s wildlife and more specifically the Porcupine Caribou herding grounds. The primary environmental concerns of the region involve the permafrost and the transferring of the oil through pipelines or the shipping industry. The primary concern of the permafrost involves the pipes in which the oil is pumped and transferred from the derricks. Many of these pipes have aged poorly with wear and tear. Because of the great cost associated with replacing the pipes, few oil companies do so, thus greatly increasing the chances of a rupture within the pipe. When and if the rupture occurs, the oil spills out of the pipes damaging the permafrost. Unfortunately, when the permafrost is damaged, the damage is permanent and the land will never be fertile again. The primary fear regarding the transportation of the oil, whether by pipelines through the ocean or through huge tankers are spills. One needs to look no further than the Exxon Valdez disaster, the most extensive environmental damage in the oil industry’s history to see an example of this (SPRI RSG). With these fears, it is easy to see why environmentalists are up in arms against the opening of the Coastal ANWR region for oil drilling.

Possible Alternatives

There are several alternatives to the drilling in the ANWR’s Coastal Region which has been thus far protected. Many people believe that the focus of higher oil costs should be thrown at the consumer, whom continually purchase gas guzzling sport utility vehicles and have no respect for fuel efficiency in general. However, State Senator of California, Ray Hayes believes that the problem lies completely at the government level. While crude oil prices have risen considerably the past few years, so did the tax imposed by the federal and state governments. Hayes belief is that if we rid ourselves of these taxes, that there would be no need to drill into the Alaskan oil region because we could continue to import oil and pass the savings along to consumers. Hayes’s belief does not discuss the issues at stake regarding our increased dependence on crude oil, but does provide an alternative to outrageous gasoline prices (California).

Conclusion

There are obviously many advantages to opening the Coastal Region of the ANWR for exploration. Many jobs could be created by the exploration of the Coastal Region extending to direct oil derrick workers to additional workers in oil refineries. By opening the region, we would also decrease our dependence upon crude oil imports, which currently accounts for 58% of all of our oil consumption. The benefits would also be seen by consumers, who would enjoy decreases in gasoline prices in the relatively near future. There are also disadvantages and concerns to opening the region for oil exploration, primarily dealing with environmental issues. The concern stems from the belief that the piping leading to and from the oil derricks would eventually deteriorate and spill oil onto the permafrost, permanently destroying the permafrost. There are also concerns with the transportation of the oil, whether by piping or shipping across the ocean, which could lead to another Exxon Valdez-like disaster. Whatever concerns there are, it is important to recognize that there are large untapped sources of oil sitting literally in our own backyard. Therefore, keep in mind that the next time you go to the gas station and complain about ever increasing gasoline prices, that some politician is the reason why.

References

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