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JOHN P. PUERNER, *Publisher*
JOHN S. CARROLL, *Editor*
JANET CLAYTON, *Editor of the Editorial Pages*

Arctic Oil a Sham Answer

If the Bush administration is to be believed, the nation's energy woes—including the California power crisis—can be solved by, among other things, drilling for oil in an Alaskan wildlife refuge. That, however, is far from the truth.

Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, President Bush's signature energy cause, would not generate one kilowatt of electricity for California. It wouldn't even produce any oil for an estimated 10 years. And it's not likely that Congress will vote to allow oil rigs to move onto the fragile Arctic plain of Alaska's north coast anyway. The amount of oil thought to be there is not enough to significantly ease the United States' dependence on foreign oil. Nor is it enough to outweigh the value of this region as a wilderness home to caribou, wolves, bears, musk oxen and hundreds of other species.

The slightly good news from Washington is that Bush finally is beginning to take seriously the problem of California's electricity shortage and the threat it poses to the national economy. Not seriously enough, however, to join the state in attacking the problem in the short run, when that help is most desperately needed.

Bush has appointed a Cabinet task force on energy led by Vice President Dick Cheney, the former head of an oil field service company. Bush says the group will act "boldly and swiftly" to explore all aspects of national energy policy. But the only swift action that will do California any good is for the federal government to bring some stability to the West's chaotic wholesale electricity market. That is something the administration refuses to do beyond Feb. 7, when an order to energy companies to keep supplying natural gas and electric power to California expires. The administration's attitude seems to be that California must pay a price for its environmental zeal. Periodic rolling blackouts are one thing. But what if natural gas is cut off to Northern California customers for days or weeks at a time, as is currently threatened? That would be disastrous.

Cheney said California built no power plants in the past 10 years because of excessive environmental controls. In fact, it was regulatory uncertainty and economic decisions by utilities and private generating companies that caused the lack of new plants. Once deregulation was in place—although it certainly was flawed—the licensing of new plants proceeded briskly, and the process is now being accelerated.

California's power crisis was not caused by environmental extremism. Neither drilling in the Alaskan Arctic nor lectures from the White House will help solve it. The governor and Legislature are working on the problem. Constructive help from Washington is welcome.