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Wrong Way on Energy

In his opening days in office, President Bush has taken on a number of issues such as taxes and education with discipline and an appearance of growing confidence. Perhaps for that reason he believes that California's energy crisis has given him the hot hand for rolling back environmental standards and pressing his shortsighted campaign to open the 1.5-million-acre coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration. It hardly signals a balanced approach to put Vice President Dick Cheney, also an oil man, in charge of a task force aimed at developing an energy strategy to reduce America's "reliance on foreign oil" and "bring more energy into the marketplace." Mr. Bush made clear that legislation asking Congress to open the refuge would be an essential component of that strategy.

The president is certainly right on one point. The country needs a rational energy strategy that, as he also noted, encourages energy conservation as well as responsible exploration. But the first step in that strategy should not be to start punching holes in the Arctic Refuge. Even with improved drilling technologies, Mr. Bush's plan to open the refuge is as environmentally unsound and intellectually shaky as it was when Ronald Reagan suggested it 20 years ago and when Mr. Bush's father suggested it a little interest in the reserve and no interest in investing in the necessary infrastructure to transport natural gas from the North Slope. So it is outrageous for them to clamor for access to the pristine lands of the refuge at a time when they have barely begun to tap the significant resources in areas of far less ecological value.

Finally, as this page has noted many times before, the relatively trivial amounts of recoverable oil in the refuge cannot possibly justify the potential corruption of a unique and irreplaceable natural area. While government estimates of "technically recoverable" oil in the coastal plain run as high as 14 billion barrels, the amount of "economically recoverable" oil at today's prices — the only figure the oil industry itself pays any attention to — is a little over three million barrels. That is about six months' supply for the nation. A much larger amount, in conjunction with a grave national-security emergency, would be needed to consider even the environmentally sensitive drilling of which Mr. Bush speaks.

Before the California energy crisis blew up, the environmental community was reasonably confident that a coalition of Democrats and moderate Republicans in both the Senate and House could defeat, albeit narrowly, any effort to open the refuge to drilling.