Refuge's fate rests with Americans outside Alaska

By Nick Jans

In the little Alaska timber and fishing town where I work, the buzz is out. Pimple-faced high school kids and grizzled loggers alike are talking about dropping everything and going to technical school to study welding or diesel mechanics. In the next year or two, everything's going to bust loose in the northland, and they want to be ready.

The cause of the almost universal optimism is simple: Bill Clinton is out, and George W. Bush is in. The lean years for Alaska are over; statewide, it's open season on dozens of resource-development projects, ranging in size from large to enormous — everything from timber contracts to mines to natural-gas pipelines.

The undisputed brass ring on the carousel is, without a doubt, the oil-bearing strata in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska's upper right-hand corner. How much oil is there depends on whom you ask and how the numbers are tweaked, but no one disputes the fact that there are billions of barrels waiting to be tapped. The economic stakes, both for Alaska and the oil industry, are immense, and the majority sentiment statewide always has been enthusiastically in favor of immediate development. Only a veto-supported blockade by the Clinton administration kept ANWR tantalizingly out of reach for the past eight years; now a Republican victory holds the promise of an open door.

Even before the election had been decided, pro-development drum-beating neared a crescendo. Republican Sen. Frank Murkowski of Alaska wrote opinion essays touting an ANWR go-ahead in both *The Washington Post* and the *Juneau Empire*; then came the persistent scuttlebutt that Alaska Gov. Tony Knowles (although a Democrat, also an ANWR oil booster) was on the short list for a Bush Cabinet post, either energy czar or Interior secretary.

That the rumors proved unfounded only serves to underscore the rampant wishful thinking that characterizes Alaskans, most of whom are yearning for the next boom. A hundred years ago, it was fueled by gold; then came timber and fish; most recently, the North Slope oil fields and pipeline, which propelled the state into lavish, heady prosperity during the late 1970s and early '80s. Now it has been nearly 20 years, and the easy money has petered out. It's time for another economic fix.

Alaska's half-million citizens as a whole are among the least conservation-minded folks in the entire nation. You'd think that proximity to so much vast, natural beauty would foster some sort of protectionist fervor; instead, it results in an odd complacency bordering on contempt — perhaps because there seems to be no end to the land, or its resources.

But that sense of limitless bounty, riches without consequence, is an illusion, as it has been since our nation's early "Westering" days. Even Alaska, like a giant nibbled to death by ducks, gradually is succumbing to our apparently insatiable urge to build and destroy. In the case of ANWR, we need to decide what's more important: at best a few more years' worth of gasoline and fuel oil, or a place beyond time, an untouched, mountain-rimmed landscape where caribou and wolves wander, something to show our children and grandchildren that we were not entirely unwise.

The oil wells aren't the issue. Their footprint is relatively small. But oil fields drag a huge logistical tail — roads and pipelines and gravel pits and bridges — and therein lies the rub. Also, in the end, the haul road will become public highway, and when you can drive a Winnebago from Florida into ANWR, circle the wagons for good. The caribou and grizzlies may well survive in some fashion, as Murkowski claims; a wilderness pierced by a highway will not.

And a conquered ANWR is bound to open a floodgate of lesser, but still huge, projects statewide that have far less symbolic pizazz. How will pro-conservation forces, already dispirited, mount an effective media campaign to bar a mining road here and a clear-cut there? Many of the real battles, the ones upon which preserving much of Alaska's wild lands depend, are notably lacking in sex appeal. If there ever were a Stalingrad for the environmental movement in Alaska, it's ANWR.

As an Alaskan, my interest is admittedly partisan. As a longtime resident of the remote northwest Arctic region, where the road system has yet to reach, more partisan still. The fact that virtually our entire congressional delegation, the governor and the average Alaskan will consider me a posy-sniffing tree-hugger for daring to oppose pro-development policies puts me out somewhere in left field. This despite my owning a small arsenal of hunting weapons, including an honest-to-gosh assault rifle with a 20-round clip. For two decades, I hunted and fished with my Inupiat neighbors for much of what I ate, and killed enough animals to make an ardent "sportsman" seem like a pacifist. Yet Alaska is so redneck at its core that many would label me a New Age weirdo.

My point is, you can't count on Alaskans to safeguard the land they so bitterly and wrongly claim is theirs to do with as they please. If ANWR is to remain what its initials spell out — an Arctic national wildlife refuge — then many Americans from other states must raise their voices and make it so.

It was set aside as a national treasure, not another industrial park. Would we sell Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon for a few cents less at the gas pump?

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