News
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President Joe Biden speaks about the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 during a ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Sept. 13, 2022. Biden has made fighting climate change a core part of his agenda, but he's infuriated environmental activists by approving the Willow oil drilling project in Alaska. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)



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The Biden administration's approval this week of a massive oil drilling project in northern Alaska amounts to "a betrayal" of the president's pledges on climate change and endangers Arctic communities with pollution, said faith-based organizations who joined environmental and Indigenous groups in condemning the decision.

The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management on March 13 issued its final decision to permit ConocoPhillips' multibillion-dollar Willow project for Alaska's North Slope in the state's National Petroleum Reserve. According to the Bureau of Land Management, the project will include up to 199 oil wells and is estimated to produce 576 million barrels over 30 years, with 239 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, or the equivalent carbon emissions from 64 coal-fired power plants in one year.

The approved plan scaled back the oil company's original proposal to three drill sites from five. In a separate arrangement, ConocoPhillips agreed to relinquish oil development leases covering roughly 68,000 acres in the region, with the majority in the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area.

In what was viewed as an effort to limit potential backlash, the Biden administration announced a day earlier it will block future oil and gas leasing in 2.8 million acres off Alaska's coast in the Arctic Ocean, and 13 million acres in the National Petroleum Reserve, Alaska. And on Tuesday, President Joe Biden, at the urging of former president Jimmy Carter, also canceled a land-swap deal that would have allowed a road to be built through Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

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But those conservation moves have done little to quell outrage over greenlighting the Willow Project. Climate groups have called the project "a carbon bomb" and vowed to continue to try to block it, including in court. Opposition campaigns to Willow on social media, including TikTok, attracted hundreds of millions of views.

A 2022 report from the International Energy Agency stated that governments must stop approving new fossil fuel development if the world is to meet the Paris Agreement goal of limiting average global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

In light of that report, the Willow project "would be devastating to the health of our global climate, as well as the already fragile ecosystems and biodiversity of Alaska," the Laudato Si' Movement said in a statement.

"As Catholics, we are called 'to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' and yet this decision threatens irreparable harm to both," the group said, citing the Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," where he also stated the use of fossil fuels "needs to be progressively replaced without delay."

"No more means no more," said the Rev. Fletcher Harper, executive director of GreenFaith.

> "We cannot drill our way into a sustainable future."
>
> —Charity Sr. Louise Lears, Franciscan Action Network
>
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Environmental groups have argued the project will lock the United States, the largest historical source of heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions, into decades more dependence on fossil fuels at a time when climate science has outlined the need for a rapid transition to renewable energy to avert the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, especially for frontline communities.

Many of them have also pointed to Biden's pledge on the campaign trail to bar new oil and gas exploration on public lands, saying at one point "No more drilling on federal lands, period."

"I guess the period changed to a comma — except for the massive Willow project in the National Petroleum Reserve, Alaska," Charity Sr. Louise Lears, head of creation advocacy for Franciscan Action Network, told EarthBeat.

"We will continue to ask the Biden [administration] to reverse this decision," she said. "We cannot drill our way into a sustainable future."

Rev. Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power & Light, said on Twitter that the Willow Project was "a huge step in the wrong direction" and at odds with the "moral obligation to protect our climate."

Catholic Climate Covenant directed a request for comment to the Alaska Conference of Catholic Bishops, which declined to comment.

In a statement, People vs Fossil Fuels, a national coalition of 1,200 organizations, said, "Global scientists have been absolutely clear: We must end fossil fuel expansion if we are going to avoid irreversible climate devastation and immediate harm to frontline communities."

The move by the Biden administration to advance a major oil project comes as global energy uncertainty continues in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and as the White House rolls out hundreds of billions of dollars the president signed into law to move the country to clean energy.

Lears said Franciscan Action Network members have joined letter writing and other campaigns against Willow, including a March 3 rally outside the White House. She added the Franciscan community stood in solidarity with the people of Nuiqsut, the town closest to the project site, and the frontline and Indigenous communities that will be most impacted.

In a statement, Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic said the oil drilling project will have "detrimental impacts" on the local ecosystem and communities, as well as the climate. The Indigenous group is among six parties that are now suing the Bureau of Land Management in the federal district court for Alaska, alleging the approval violated several federal conservation laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act and Endangered Species Act. Earthjustice, an environmental legal firm, has brought a separate suit to halt the

project.

"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," Sovereign Iñupiat said in the statement.

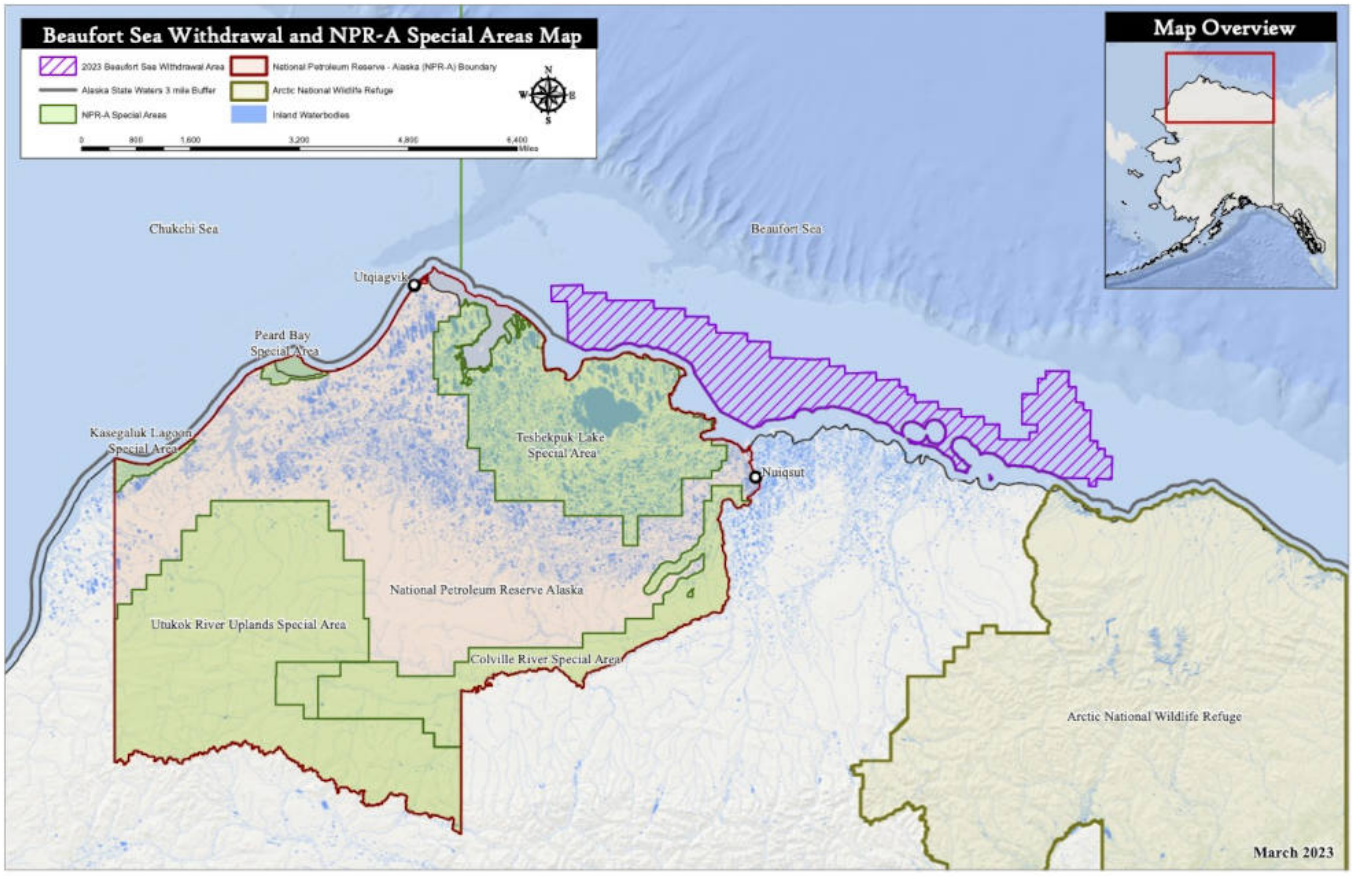
> "The true cost of the Willow project is to the land and to animals and people forced to breathe polluted air and drink polluted water."
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The Bureau estimates the oil drilling project will provide Alaska with $10 billion in increased revenue, and federal revenues up to $7 billion. Construction is expected to take eight years, with up to 1,700 workers employed during that phase and up to 450 workers during drilling.

In a statement, ConocoPhillips' CEO called the project's approval "the right decision for Alaska and for our nation."

Willow drew support from Alaska's congressional delegation: Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola. Murkowski, who is Catholic, said with its approval "we can almost literally feel Alaska's future brightening because of it."

Fletcher told EarthBeat that Biden's move to bar oil drilling in other parts of Alaska and the Arctic is "not a free pass" to move the Willow project forward. He said that the current state of climate change — with temperatures on track to rise 2.8 C by 2100 — means fossil fuel projects that contribute only a small percentage to overall greenhouse gas emissions still pose dangerous consequences.



A map released by the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management shows the 2.8 million acres in the Beaufort Sea that the Biden administration has barred from future oil and gas development. The administration announced the decision March 12, 2023, along with further protections of 13 million acres in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. (Wikimedia Commons/Bureau of Land Management)

Days before the Willow project was approved, GreenFaith senior organizer and Unitarian Universalist Aly Tharp was removed from a major oil industry conference in Houston, where ConocoPhillips is headquartered. During the CERAWeek panel that included France-based TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanne, Tharp stood on her chair and sang a climate justice song while holding a banner against the construction of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline Project and the Rio Grande LNG gas project in Texas.

"I really see the systemic injustice of our society being reliant on fossil fuels, which are causing tremendous harm … literally killing people and jeopardizing the future of life, of all life, on our planet," she told EarthBeat.

She added that her protest held special meaning to her since fellow climate activist Svitlana Romanko, a Ukrainian and former campaigner for Laudato Si' Movement, was barred from attending the CERAWeek conference despite being registered. Romanko has frequently spoken out on the links between the fossil fuel industry and the war Russia is waging in her home country.

"It's really unjustifiable to use the war in Ukraine to expand fossil fuel infrastructure," Tharp said. "We should be using the current energy crisis to help us accelerate the transition we need to make off of fossil fuels."

As for the Willow project, Tharp, who represents GreenFaith on the People vs Fossil Fuels steering committee, said environmental groups are discussing strategies to continue to oppose the new oil drilling in Alaska.

"Biden promised he wouldn't do this when he ran for election. So it's a betrayal of his word. And it's a mistake," she said.

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