

Pool

Alaska lands legislation has been drafted, debated, redrafted and bottled up during the past decade of Congressional indecision-making. This week the full Senate finally debates the most important conservation legislation of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the complex issue of public wildlands in Alaska has been confused by two major fictions.

First, some interests allege that a strong bill (like the Udall-Anderson bill passed by a 360-to-65 landslide in the House of Representatives) would violate Alaska's rights as a state. In fact, the rights of Alaskans have been respected. Pending legislation involves federally-owned land that has belonged to the American people since 1967, and will continue to belong to all Americans. The State of Alaska has already received a land grant of 104 million acres. Given the right to select this huge land grant from the public domain, the state quickly chose some of the richest oil and gas areas, as well as many areas rich in mineral and agricultural potential.

Washington also is proceeding with the transfer of another 44 million acres granted to Alaskan Natives in settlement of their land claims. We are working to speed these transfers of land once owned by the federal government. When transfer is complete, Alaskans will own approximately 150 million acres, 40 percent of all the land in Alaska. This is the majority of the state's most valuable, most developable land.

Second, some interests allege that strong conservation legislation would "lock up" the energy resources in Alaska. In fact, there is only one major area of conflict that involved potential energy resources -- the William O. Douglas Arctic Wildlife Range. It is uncertain whether there is oil beneath the Range in economically recoverable quantities. This public land contains the sensitive calving groups for one of the largest free-roaming caribou herds left in North America. I oppose all-out exploration there now because the risk to the herd's survival -- and the survival of Native Alaskans who depend on the caribou for food -- is too great.

The Senate Energy Committee's version of Alaska lands legislation would allow oil exploration in the Range. This major weakness will be addressed by one of 5 strengthening amendments that I will offer. This amendment (cosponsored by Senators Nelson and Levin) provides instead for private industry exploration and development in the nearby 22-million acre National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, estimated to have twice the recoverable hydrocarbons of the Douglas Arctic Range. According to recent U.S. Geological Survey data, Alaska's total new oil potential is a mean of 27 billion barrels, of which about 15 billion barrels is offshore and unaffected by any Alaska lands bill. Overall, 95 percent of all onshore lands with high or favorable hydrocarbon potential would be open to development under the strengthening amendments.

In general, the Senate Committee's bill disregards the fragility, pristine character and vastness of the public lands in Alaska. It risks the integrity of prime national park, wildlife refuge and wilderness lands. The Committee's Alaskan map is riddled with lands dropped from the strong conservation designations they deserve and now have, in favor of speculative mining or other developmental uses that may never succeed. Logical, cohesive units are fragmented into a clutter of conflicting management units.

The Committee-passed bill tilts too far toward development interests. In Southeast Alaska, for example, it mandates the overcutting of timber resources. The unique wilderness areas endangered there include the existing Admiralty Island and Misty Fjords National Monuments. The bill directs that 520 million board feet of timber there be made available annually to private industry. This is over 70 million board feet more than the average annual cut since 1975. One of the strengthening amendments would bar such an unjustifiable, unacceptable increase. 56

The five amendments will specifically protect the valid economic rights of timber, mining, and energy industries, and provide for orderly oil and gas development in some of the most promising regions. The ~~strengthening~~ amended bill would incorporate ~~a number of points urged by the Alaska legislature and Governor Hammond. These include protection of the state's traditional fish and wildlife management role, accommodations to ease development of the U.S. Borax molybdenum deposit at Quartz Hill, and revocation of ~~the bill's~~ ~~executive land withdrawals of the Carter Administration. (This last concession is appropriate only in a bill that gives full protection to the land and wildlife involved in each conservation unit with appropriate boundaries.)~~~~ a number of points urged by the Alaska legislature and Governor Hammond. These include protection of the state's traditional fish and wildlife management role, accommodations to ease development of the U.S. Borax molybdenum deposit at Quartz Hill, and revocation of ~~the bill's~~ ~~executive land withdrawals of the Carter Administration. (This last concession is appropriate only in a bill that gives full protection to the land and wildlife involved in each conservation unit with appropriate boundaries.)~~

~~The strengthening amendments would~~

At present, the Senate Committee's ~~bill~~ bill is below the rock-bottom line for Americans committed to conserving priceless parts of our last, vast natural treasure. It must be strengthened by ~~an~~ an amendments package based on information developed over many years of work. These amendments ^{recognize} ~~through~~ the needs and aspirations of Alaska's Natives, timber workers, mining interests and residents for land and resources to maintain the State's economy. But they are balanced ^{in the} ~~by the knowledge~~ ^{knowledge} fundamental fact that these lands belong to all Americans. Congress finally is facing this urgent challenge--to save great stretches of land that symbolize ^{at} ~~our~~ natural heritage ^{we let slip away elsewhere} ~~where it has not already~~ ^{been lost}

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where it has not already been lost

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