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Oil And Trouble

Energy: A new report on oil development in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was met with the usual howls. But that doesn't change the fact that there are no good reasons not to open oil fields in that region.

Last week, the Energy Department's Energy Information Administration issued a study that said oil pumped from ANWR could cut U.S. dependence on foreign oil by nearly 900,000 barrels a day by 2025 -- about two-thirds of what we import from Saudi Arabia each day.

Environmental groups reflexively dismissed the report, saying that the boost is so negligible that it's not worth disturbing the coastal plain. They wield heavy political clout and get a great deal of public sympathy for their positions. But those strengths are derived from the groups' muddled presentation of the facts.

Even though opening ANWR would mean a 20% increase in domestic production, the green groups say that contribution won't address the country's energy needs; they look at the predicted decline in domestic oil production and can say that ANWR will replace only what will be lost.

There is another side to this argument, though. If ANWR had already been tapped, it would be providing enough oil to today's market that those gasoline prices that have climbed so painfully high would still be within a more reasonable range.

As for replacing what will be lost in the inevitable fall in domestic production, that speaks for itself. If we don't replace it with Alaskan oil, it will have to come from another country. We import about 55% of our oil now, but if ANWR isn't opened to development, the EIA says that ratio will hit 70% by 2025.

Even if ANWR were to cut U.S. dependence on foreign oil to zero, it's a good bet environmentalists would still oppose development because, in the words of Jim Waltman of The Wilderness Society, the region is a "national treasure."

We don't dispute that to some eyes ANWR is beautiful. But it can be appreciated only in small doses. For several months of the year, it simply can't be seen -- there is no sunlight in the region.

The public won't hear that on the network news or read it in their local daily newspaper. Nor will it be told that of ANWR's 19.6 million acres, the footprint for oil extraction will be a mere 2,000 acres.

Consider that Alaska's land mass exceeds 366 million acres and it turns out that ANWR's relation to the rest of the state would be roughly equal to that of a postage stamp sitting in a space a little larger than a quarter of a basketball court.

One other environmental fact that environmentalists won't speak of is the increase in herd size of caribou from 3,000 to 32,000 since oil production began in Alaska's Prudhoe Bay. It's just too easy to claim, without substantiation, that development will be an ecological disaster.

But that's expected. The green groups don't want anyone to know their secret: There is no good argument against drilling in ANWR.