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Environment

Obama asks Congress to designate ANWR coastal plain as wilderness

Alex DeMarban | April 3, 2015

Setting the stage for a showdown with Congress over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the White House on Friday said it was transmitting to lawmakers President Barack Obama's recommendation to expand wilderness areas in the refuge, including the potentially oil-rich plain along the U.S. Arctic Ocean.

Though it's sure to inflame both sides of the long-running debate over oil development in the 1.5-million-acre coastal plain, the move is a formality that has been expected since January. That's when Obama announced his wilderness-expansion recommendation in a video -- and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and others notified Alaska leaders -- enraging politicians who have long wanted oil to flow from ANWR.

The move followed Interior's issuing a record of decision on Friday related to a final management plan for the refuge. The plan is designed to preserve subsistence needs, protect fish and wildlife and ensure opportunities for fish- and wildlife-dependent recreation, said a statement from the White House sent to lawmakers and forwarded to the Alaska Dispatch News by the office of Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska.

"With these points in mind, and pursuant to the Wilderness Act of 1964, I am recommending that the Congress pass legislation making additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System," the statement said. "It is a national treasure and should be permanently protected through legislation for future generations."

Alaska's congressional delegation has long sought oil exploration and production in ANWR, but there has been a stalemate over that idea for decades, with environmental groups strongly opposed and clashing with pro-development forces.

Over 7 million acres of the refuge are currently managed as wilderness. Obama is asking Congress to approve another 12 million acres as wilderness, including the coastal plain. Four rivers -- the Atigun, Hulahula, Kongakut and Marsh Fork Canning -- would be included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Both sides of the long-running debate have said a wilderness expansion would put oil development in the coastal plain further out of reach. If the Republican-led Congress supports the idea, it would be the largest ever wilderness designation since the Wilderness Act was passed half a century ago.

Only Congress can designate wilderness areas and wild and scenic rivers. Members of the Alaska delegation have said that won't happen with this Congress.

Sullivan blasted the move as an outrageous assault that threatens Alaska's future and America's energy security. He said he will work his colleagues in Congress to stop it.

"It will never see the light of day in Congress," he said. "President Obama's goal of starving the trans-Alaska pipeline of oil and turning our state into a giant national park will not stand."

Environmental groups applauded the recommendation as "visionary" and said they would work to see it approved.

"This wilderness recommendation is a huge step toward permanent protection for one of America's last great wild landscapes, and a victory for millions of Americans who want Alaska's Arctic Refuge left in its natural state," said Nicole

Whittington-Evans, Alaska regional director for The Wilderness Society.

If Congress rejects the proposal, Sen. Lisa Murkowski and other Alaska leaders have said they fear Obama will use the Antiquities Act to single-handedly declare the oil-rich coastal plain of the refuge a national monument before he leaves office.

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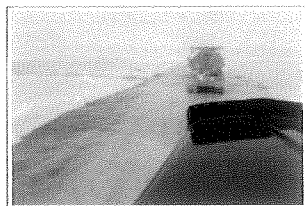
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