



Biden expected to approve enormous oil drilling project in blow to climate activists: 'Complete betrayal'

Description

The Biden administration is expected to soon push ahead with a massive northern Alaska oil drilling project that is forecasted to create thousands of jobs and 600 million barrels of oil over its 30-year lifespan, according to multiple reports.

Senior administration officials have signed off on three of the five drilling sites proposed by oil company ConocoPhillips as part of its Willow Project in the National Petroleum Reserve located in North Slope Borough, Alaska, Bloomberg reported Friday evening. ConocoPhillips previously stated that, for the project to remain economic viability, the federal government would need to approve at least three of the sites.

The Department of Interior (DOI) will publish the final decision on the Willow Project, but President Biden and senior White House officials have been actively involved in overseeing the approval process. Industry groups, Alaska lawmakers and local communities urged the president to approve the project for its economic benefits while activists argued it would have a devastating impact on the environment.

"This decision on Willow is a huge test for the Biden administration on so many issues that they claim to care about," Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, told Fox News Digital in an interview last week. "Of course it's critically important to Alaska, but it's critically important to America — a project of this size when we need energy security."



Interior Secretary Deb Haaland visits Granada, Colorado, on Feb. 19, 2022. (Hyoung Chang/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post via Getty Images)

In a statement Saturday, the White House noted Biden's "aggressive climate agenda" and denied that a decision has been made on Willow.

"President Biden is delivering on the most aggressive climate agenda of any U.S. president in history and spurring an unprecedented expansion of clean energy," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement to Fox News Digital.

"The Department of the Interior will make an independent decision on the Willow Project," she continued. "No final decisions have been made — anyone who says there has been a final decision is wrong."

The expected final record of decision comes years after ConocoPhillips first proposed the project. The company has projected it would produce up to 180,000 barrels of oil per day, create more than 2,500 construction jobs and 300 long-term jobs, and deliver as much as \$17 billion in revenue for the federal government, Alaska and local communities, many of which are Indigenous.

ConocoPhillips Alaska said last month that the project — which was originally approved under the Trump administration before a federal judge ordered the government to conduct a more rigorous environmental analysis — would "benefit local communities and enhance American energy security."

Overall, the project would entail constructing up to 250 wells, multiple pipelines, a central processing plant, an airport and a gravel mine. Opponents of the project said Willow would damage the environment — as a result of both construction and emissions produced from drilled oil — and produce a total carbon footprint irreconcilable with the Biden administration's broader climate agenda.



Climate activists hold a demonstration to urge President Biden to reject the Willow Project at the Department of the Interior headquarters on Nov. 17 in Washington, D.C. (Jemal Countess/Getty Images for Sunrise AU)

"The Willow project is a climate disaster waiting to happen that would devastate wildlife, lands, AK communities, and our climate," the Sierra Club tweeted Friday. "We need to speed our transition to clean energy, not double-down on oil and gas."

In addition to environmental groups, climate-focused Democratic lawmakers, have similarly urged Biden against handing a favorable decision to the project, also saying it would increase global emissions and counter progress the administration has made on climate change. It is estimated to produce 278 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions, the equivalent of the carbon footprint of two million cars, over its 30-year lifespan.

"If this story is right, it's a complete betrayal of Biden's promise not to allow more drilling and a complete catastrophe to rein in climate chaos," Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., tweeted following the reports Friday. "You can't ask other countries to forgo their fossil fuels if we keep greenlighting projects here in America."

Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., the top Democrat on the Natural Resources Committee, said in February that Willow is the "exact opposite of what the Biden administration stands for."

The project has also sparked a large opposition campaign on social media, with millions of users calling on Biden to block it.

As of Friday, two Change.org petitions urging Biden to "say no" to the Willow Project had received more than four million signatures. And the hashtag #StopWillow has gone viral on social media, garnering more than 650 million impressions across platforms.



Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, and other members of his state's congressional delegation have been vocal proponents of the Willow Project. (Al Drago-Pool/Getty Images)

However, Sen. Sullivan and his fellow members of the state's congressional delegation — Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola — have aggressively advocated for the Biden administration to approve an economically viable proposal for the project over the last several months. They have argued that it would provide a substantial boost for the state and local communities.

The delegation met with Biden at the White House for more than an hour on March 2 to reiterate their support for an economically viable approval.

"The Willow Project has been one of my top priorities because it is deeply important to our future as a state," Peltola said. "In the short term, this project will provide thousands of good-paying union jobs and help jump-start Alaska's economy."

"In the long term, the revenues from Willow will pay for essential state services like public safety and investments in our education system."



A lone oil barrel is pictured near the Kokalik River, which winds through the National Petroleum Reserve in northern Alaska. (Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images) (Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images)

The Willow Project has received support from Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy, Alaska Native communities, labor unions, leaders of the North Slope Borough and the Alaska Federation of Natives. The Alaska legislature passed a unanimous bipartisan resolution in support of the project.

On Feb. 1, DOI subagency Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released its supplemental environmental impact statement for the project. The analysis highlighted the large amount of emissions expected to be produced from the project, but showed that turning to foreign oil imports in lieu of the project's output would result in an even larger carbon footprint.

The BLM ultimately identified a preferred alternative of three drilling sites in the statement, but noted a final decision could defer some of the sites.

Then, in an unusual move, the DOI issued a statement that it had "substantial concerns about the Willow project and the preferred alternative as presented" in the environmental analysis shortly after BLM released it.

by Thomas Catenacci

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