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The energy challenges facing the United States are multifaceted. As such, they require a multifaceted, comprehensive solution and America must develop a cohesive national energy policy. Opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to exploration for oil and natural gas will not solve our challenges, but it can be a component of a broader solution.

ANWR is about half the size of the State of Washington. The issue at hand is opening the 1.5 million acre Coastal Plain. The remaining 18 million acres – often the subject of beautiful pictures depicting the Alaska wilderness – will never be touched for oil or gas exploration of any kind.

If enough oil is found and the Coastal Plain is opened for exploration, the “footprint” of development will be very small – less than 2,000 acres. This is smaller than Seattle’s Sea-Tac Airport, and approximately 0.01% of the land within ANWR. The remaining 99.99%, or 18,998,000 acres will remain unaffected.

The Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce wanted to know how much oil we can expect if we explore in ANWR. Geological scientists with experience in oil and gas agreed that ANWR is the largest potentially productive unexplored onshore basin in America. The Department of Energy recently predicted that, if ANWR were to be opened, production from that area would range from 650,000 – 1.9 million barrels a day, comparable to the historical production of North America’s largest oil field, Prudhoe Bay. **That’s enough production to replace current imports from Iraq for 40 years.**

Another concern the Chamber had was the effect of exploration on the wildlife in ANWR. Similar questions were asked in the 1970s, during debate over opening Prudhoe Bay to oil production. We now know what happened there. When construction started, there were 3,000 caribou among the Prudhoe Bay herd; this past year there were over 27,000. Oil production and wildlife can co-exist if development is conducted properly.

What about the environmental risks? Over the past 20 years, there have been many technological advances in oil production, which dramatically reduce the environmental impact of oil exploration and production. Roads are no longer built of gravel; they are built of ice during the winter months and melt during the summer thaw, leaving little impact on the tundra. New drilling techniques allow drills to move sideways through the earth, recovering oil within a five mile radius.

Environmental damage from spills or other accidents is far less likely to occur in the U.S., under the eyes of federal and state regulators and where technology is more advanced than almost any other oil-producing nation. Since the demand for oil and petroleum products will continue to be strong for years to come, the supply will need to come from somewhere.

What about our energy independence? Today, America gets almost 60% of its oil from foreign sources. By 2020, projections show that number will hit 70%. Such reliance on foreign sources for a vital energy supply is not in our best interest. Until hydrogen fuel cells are powering our homes and cars, we will need oil as a source of energy, and having a viable domestic supply simply makes sense.

The Puget Sound region stands to gain a great deal if the Coastal Plain is opened. In a recent study sponsored by the Greater Seattle and Tacoma-Pierce County Chambers of Commerce, it was determined that, as of 2003, approximately 103,500 Puget Sound jobs are a result of our connection with Alaska. Estimates show that 12,000 new jobs will be created in Washington if exploration is allowed in the Coastal Plain. Tool and machine manufacturing, transportation, software production, and legal and accounting services will all be positively impacted as a result of the opening of a small fraction of ANWR.

Like many in our region, the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce had questions about opening ANWR to responsible exploration. But we listened to the evidence above and we know that a strong Alaska is vital to a strong Washington. For all of these reasons, the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce is re-iterating its longstanding support for responsible oil and natural gas exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Sincerely,

Steve Leahy
President & CEO