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Let Alaska Sell American Energy to the World

Biden's limits on North Slope drilling have made the Ukraine war much costlier to Europe and the U.S.

By Harry Brower Jr. and Josiah Patkotak

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An oil pipeline stretches across the landscape outside Prudhoe Bay in North Slope Borough, Alaska, May 25, 2019.

PHOTO: BONNIE JO MOUNT/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Utqiagvik, Alaska

Even as Russian tanks lined up on the Ukrainian border in February, the Biden administration froze U.S. drilling on federal lands and issued rules making it harder to build natural-gas pipelines. We may be Inupiaq Eskimos 5,000 miles away from the Washington policy machine, but we know crazy when we see it. And this is crazy.

Big profits from oil and gas exports to Europe and the U.S. are enabling Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine. Curtailing U.S. energy production forces the world to buy oil and gas from countries like Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, which have abysmal human-rights records, low environmental standards and high carbon emissions. It doesn't have to be this way. The U.S. can responsibly produce enough energy to meet its own needs and those of the world while weakening Russia—but only if Washington allows it to happen.

Prudhoe Bay on the North Slope—one of the biggest oil fields in North America—is on our ancestral lands. Since 1977, Prudhoe Bay has produced more than 18 billion barrels of oil, contributing billions of dollars to state and federal coffers, funding development in Alaska's native communities, and contributing to U.S. national security. Because energy markets are global, oil produced on the North Slope has helped power the world. Alaskans have done all of this while protecting our lands and waters.

Alaska's North Slope—the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, or NPR-A—has the same potential. Roughly the size of Indiana, the NPR-A was set aside in 1923 by President Warren Harding for oil production in case of emergency. The site contains billion of barrels of oil. Invigorated by the previous administration, which encouraged increased domestic production, investments were flowing in to projects on the North Slope. It looked as though Alaskans, Americans and the world would soon benefit.

But then came the Biden administration, galvanized by extreme environmentalists whose goal is to shut down oil production. The opportunity was lost. Strict environmental standards mean that unlike other places in the country, the drilling season in Alaska is short, and timely permits are essential. The Biden administration has consistently delayed those permits, taking off the table any hope of drilling in winter. They have demanded further studies for projects that have been studied to death. They've also discouraged financial institutions from investing in the Arctic on both federal and private lands.

Reducing carbon emissions is crucial for the planet. Alaska is on the front lines of climate change. That is why Alaskans push tirelessly to ensure that energy companies drilling for oil do so with the most cutting-edge carbon-reducing technology.

Before the discovery at Prudhoe Bay—and before Alaska Natives gathered in force to demand rights to their lands and resources—our direct forebears, and the ancestors of many who still live on the North Slope, were among the most impoverished people on the planet.

But the Inupiaq culture discourages victimhood and resentment. We are now teachers and doctors. We are whaling captains and city workers. We are no longer one whale hunt away from starvation. We have healthcare clinics and schools in our communities. Still, our needs are great. Many of our people lack amenities such as running water and access to the internet, which people in the lower 48 states take for granted.

During times of conflict and war indigenous Alaskans have always answered the call to service, even when denied basic civil rights. During World War II and the Cold War, thousands of Alaska natives trained in special programs to serve as scouts and defenders of our state and country. Later, our men and women were sent from our Arctic villages to fight and sometimes die in steamy jungles and barren deserts half a world away. We are a patriotic people, and it's in our nature to protect and serve what's ours—our communities, our state, our country, our world.

As one nation invades another thousands of miles away from the North Slope of Alaska, as our country is hurting from high energy prices, as the world feels as if it is on the brink of chaos, we are here to help and we are here to serve. Will President Biden allow us to do so?

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