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U.S. Reverses Accord and Opens 389,000 Acres in Alaska to Explore for Oil

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

WASHINGTON, Jan. 12 - The Interior Department has decided to open 389,000 acres of Alaskan lakes, tundra and shoreline to oil exploration, reversing an eight-year-old compromise intended to protect the habitat of hundreds of thousands of migratory birds and the hunting grounds of Inupiat natives who live near the Beaufort Sea.

Henri Bisson, the state director of the federal Bureau of Land Management in [Alaska](#), said Thursday that the new plan would increase by as much as two billion barrels the oil that could be recovered from the northeastern section of the National Petroleum Reserve while providing protection for birds in the summer when they shed their flight feathers and hatch chicks.

Critics, including Alaska Natives and groups like the Audubon Society and the Wilderness Society, said the protection would not prevent fragmenting the birds' habitat or the disturbance when pipelines were built.

There will be airplane and helicopter traffic, the critics said, and industrial activity will be a fixture of the collection of lakes and damp tundra that is now empty 150 miles west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The fight over the area where wild fowl from California, Japan, Mexico and Russia congregate every summer has been largely overshadowed by the controversy over the Arctic refuge, which remains closed to oil and gas exploration after a Democratic filibuster last month.

The two disputes center on protecting caribou, wild fowl and Alaska Natives' interests, but it is generally agreed that the Teshekpuk Lake area has a particularly important role in the annual migration of tens of thousands of birds like geese and tundra swans, providing them with relative safety from predators and ample food for the flightless weeks of summer.

"We are not persuaded that this provides the protection needed," said Stan Senner, the Audubon Society Alaska director. "I think our answer, our view, is that waterfowl

biologists who know the area have essentially all said that a core goose molting area needs to be protected without fragmentation."

Though 242,000 acres of the 389,000 can have no surface structures except pipelines, Mr. Senner said, the lines and the human monitoring they require will intrude in areas the birds have had to themselves.

The final decision, which the Interior Department released on Wednesday, opens seven tracts, of 45,000 to 60,000 acres each, that were previously off limits to energy development.

"We believe that we have put forward the best environmentally sensitive approach we could take in terms of conducting a viable oil and gas leasing and development opportunity," Mr. Bisson said in an interview. "I can't think of anything else we could do to make it more environmentally protective than we have."

He added that for the areas north of Teshekpuk Lake, the department would not allow exceptions to its restrictions except for aircraft that have to deviate from agreed-on flight patterns for passengers' safety .

Dora Nukapigak, one of 450 residents of Nuiqsut, an Inupiat village near the affected area, said she was certain that the policy reversal would have a significant impact.

"Where there's industry, there's going to be traffic, work and construction," Ms. Nukapigak said,

The 200 or so hunters in the village, she added, pursue whales and caribou, as well as fish, and she expressed concern that taking water from Teshekpuk and other lakes to build ice roads for winter construction could affect all the animals involved.

Mr. Bisson said his estimates of the commercially retrievable oil and the 3.2 trillion cubic feet of retrievable natural gas were based on federal and company data. The estimates, he said, indicate that a compromise reached by Bruce Babbitt, interior secretary in the Clinton administration, that opened all but 13 percent of the reserve to energy production left as much as three-quarters of the recoverable oil in the reserve off limits to drilling.

Mr. Bisson said there would be no more than 300 acres with improvements like roads, drilling pads or airstrips in each lease tract. Mr. Senner said the resulting spider web would be intrusive.

"We don't think the basic geometry of the areas makes sense," Mr. Senner said, referring to the 242,000 acres where surface development other than pipelines is off limits. "This will not result in fewer facilities or reduced disturbance."

