

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Floor Speech on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

December 4, 2025

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. President, I come to the floor to speak on the 11:30 vote we're about to have. And I come because I want to speak against the effort to overturn the land management plan for the Arctic [National] Wildlife Refuge.

Congress established the Arctic [National] Wildlife Refuge in 1980 to protect the diverse and unique, very fragile ecosystem located on 20 million acres in the northeast corner of Alaska. However, at the time, Congress failed to permanently protect 1.5 million acres of coastal plain, the biological beating heart of this incredible wilderness.

A wilderness that is often called America's Serengeti: that is because of the hundreds of thousands of caribou that migrate and depend on these lands, herds that Alaska Native tribes rely on for subsistence, and they have been an essential piece of their traditional culture and way of life.

Because it is one of the largest remaining untouched ecosystems on our entire planet, I believe we should strive hard to protect it. It is so unique. People do want to travel there. But many would like to ignore the fact that it is a fragile and irreplaceable beauty that lives along the coastal plain in order to search for oil and gas that may lie beneath.

The battle has been the subject of many intense congressional debates for decades. So far, we've been able to protect the coastal plain and keep it intact, as it has been for millions of years. And many Americans had hoped we had moved on. That is, moved on because even the oil companies have said, by virtue of not wanting to pay for any leases, that this area is not a good place to drill.

Some companies even paid to get out of their leases. I say moved on, because time and time again, insurers and major banks have pledged not to finance development in the refuge. The two failed lease sales under both [the] Trump and Biden administration should have been the end to all of this, and that's because we were supposed to raise \$2 billion. In fact, when the language was passed, they said, well, we'll raise \$2 billion, but they have actually only raised a few million.

So, in other words, this vote is about whether we want to spoil one of the last great pristine spots on planet Earth for what the market says is worth a few million dollars. I know especially in Europe, there is a lot of tourism in the Arctic today. There are many people that want the last frontier experience and are paying for cruise ships that actually have ice breaking capacity to travel to the Arctic Circle.

Why aren't we encouraging the same kind of tourism? And I think what makes even less sense about the future is that, why would we vote to destroy something so fragile and so irreplaceable when we have a choice?

I want to point out that using the Congressional Review Act to drill in the Arctic [National] Wildlife Refuge could very well backfire on our drilling advocates. If Congress votes to overturn the Biden record of decision today, it would create legal and regulatory chaos, not clarity.

That's because it would revive the Trump era leasing plan that is legally flawed and under active litigation, effectively leaving no valid framework for how leasing could proceed. Just a way of saying, my guess is it would have more lawsuits that would be easier to attack. That's because the CRA, [if] signed into law, the Department of Interior couldn't reissue a similar rule, and the old leasing program did have serious legal deficiencies.

Contrast that with the existing record of decision, which followed science law and public input and balancing environmental protections and resource extraction in the Arctic [National] Wildlife Refuge.

So I hope we won't make an irrevocable, irredeemable mistake in the Senate today by voting to overturn a science-based record of decision that was done by the book, and with the public input. We should be hammering out a bipartisan agreement instead on other major issues like health care affordability or finding other ways to reduce the cost of living.

But this administration has opened up all drilling all over the United States for oil and gas production, and yet it isn't much higher than the record levels that were achieved during the Biden administration. That's even after the Big Beautiful Bill gave nearly \$6 billion in tax breaks this year for some of the biggest oil and gas companies.

So, we gave huge, massive tax breaks that could have gone into paying for affordable health care, and instead, we gave them to oil companies. And yet we're not really producing much more than we have been producing under the last administration.

Even after we have seen the repeal of dozens of environmental regulations that protected America's health the oil companies had complained about. Even after the administration opened millions of acres in the sensitive lands, including the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, and millions of offshore acres, even when coastal residents are screaming they don't want these oil rigs off their coast.

So, it isn't producing the effect that some of my colleagues hoped. So, this is not a CRA we should vote for. We should oppose the CRA and keep the land management that's in place. I thank the President and I yield the floor.