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Alaska is the largest state in the country, occupying roughly 2.5 times the amount of area that Texas takes up. However, it is the least densely populated state. Much of this land is untouched and unexplored, including many reserves that are wilderness only and cannot be accessed by vehicle. Alaskans work hard to maintain their lands as pristine and beautiful. However, Alaska also relies heavily on oil drilling for their economy. Starting in 2017, oil exploration and drilling became legal in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in northeastern Alaska.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge stretches over roughly 19.6 million acres of land on the North Slope of Alaska (Leases Issued for ANWR Coastal Plain Oil & Gas Programs). Existing within the arctic circle, it is able to provide habitat to many animals that may sound exotic to the rest of the country, including muskoxen, caribou, and all three bear species that exist in North America. According to wilderness.org, there are over 270 different species that are able to thrive in this region, alongside the Gwich'in and Iñupiar peoples. It is vital to these species that this sensitive coastline remains untouched by industrialization. Unfortunately, in 2017, Congress under the Trump Administration passed extremely reckless policy that would endanger this region by allowing oil companies to lease bits of land and begin to drill. In fact, part of the controversy comes from the fact that the passing of this policy was actually fast-tracked, meaning that many of the usual steps may have been overlooked to expedite the decision making process.

Some may look at this decision and ponder what would be so bad about leasing the land to see what it has to offer. Without a doubt, Alaska is a mine of black gold, with

the oil industry making up roughly 85% of the state's economy (Alaska's Kid Corner). Because of how lucrative of a business this is for Alaskans, it should not be a big problem to see what this region can provide for the economy. The United States Geological Survey even estimates that there may be as much as 8 billion barrels of oil that could be extracted from the ANWR. While I understand the intrigue, the United States should be interested in more than just the potential economic value. Anyone who has ever been to Alaska or even just wanted to visit Alaska is intrigued by the pristine beauty. Wilderness.org explains that leasing this land would not just lead to a couple of small operations. Instead, they claim that "oil development would bring roads, airstrips, heavy machinery, noise and pollution." Not only could this decision lead to serious repercussions on the environment, but it could also destroy the habitat that belongs to so many different creatures. Not to mention, this is happening in a time when more focus should be placed on researching alternative sources of fuel and energy.

This change in policy has enraged many individuals and organizations. These organizations continue to fight alongside Indigenous cultures against the administration to set permanent protections on the ANWR and its surrounding areas. Already, the pressure applied on large banking corporations have helped lead to the rejection of many financial loans needed to support drilling projects. As these groups continue to advocate for permanent protections, it can be hard to find something that single individuals can do, especially those who do not live in Alaska. It is important to remember that, while this decision most directly impacts Alaska, these decisions are being made on a federal level and affecting federal land.

The easiest way to help overturn this decision would be to donate to one of the organizations fighting directly with Congress. This could be as simple as going online with a just a few spare minutes throughout your day, or as extravagant as hosting fundraising parties to try to educate your colleagues on the topic. Also, this decision was huge! There are many organizations across the country looking for individuals to join them in spreading awareness on the issue. Because this is happening on a federal level, it would also be beneficial to contact the members of Congress that represent you to inform them on how important this issue is to you and why. Reminding your representatives that the funding for this project could be put towards renewable energy could be the information that they are forgetting. Alaska receives as much as 24 hours of solar income during the peak of summer, experience hurricane-level windspeed, and has great potential for geothermal energy. With a new administration in the White House, it could be easier to have this message heard.

As someone who has lived in Alaska, I know how sensitive its ecosystems can be to the smallest changes. While individuals in Arizona may not be able to identify proof of climate change in their immediate vicinity, Alaskans have witnessed firsthand that these changes are undeniable. Adding another industrialized operation to this region would only further destroy the beauty of Alaska and continue to expedite the already abundant effects of climate change across the state. While the entirety of America's economy is important, funding research into renewable energy and maintaining public lands for the sake of ecotourism could provide better outcome in the long run. Let's make sure that America's largest state does not cause large destruction. Let us support America the Beautiful.

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