

Opening Statement of Chairman Pombo

March 12, 2003, Committee Hearing on H.R. 39

"Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act of 2003"

The Committee will come to order. The Committee is meeting today to hear testimony on H.R. 39, the Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act of 2003, sponsored by the laid-back former Chairman of this Committee, and someone I consider a personal friend, Congressman Don Young of Alaska.

Under Committee Rule 4(g) the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member can make opening statements. If any other Members have statements, they can be included in the hearing record under unanimous consent.

With a few exceptions, H.R. 39 is identical to what passed in the House in the 107th Congress as part of a comprehensive energy bill. The Senate version of the energy bill did not contain a provision opening ANWR, and a conference committee failed to reconcile the two bills.

H.R. 39 authorizes environmentally-sound oil and gas exploration, development, and production on the 1.5 million-acre coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, an area specifically reserved by Congress for its oil and gas potential. Under this bill, the rest of ANWR itself will remain untouched.

We're holding a hearing on H.R. 39 because ANWR again will be a cornerstone of the House's comprehensive energy bill.

Many of you must be wondering why there has been continuing interest in ANWR for the last 25 years. What is so special about this flat, treeless arctic desert?

ANWR's coastal plain is potentially the largest undiscovered on-shore oil field in North America. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates there are 5.7 billion to 16 billion barrels of recoverable oil there, with a mean of 10.4 billion barrels.

Putting this in perspective, 10.4 billion barrels is twice as much as all proven reserves in the State of Texas. It could increase America's reserves by 50 percent. It could be one of the world's largest discoveries of oil in the last 30 years.

As America's dependence on foreign oil approaches 60 percent, it is foolish not to look for oil in a place that could hold resources of this magnitude, especially at a time when a substantial amount of this foreign oil is imported from hostile governments.

It defies commons sense to buy oil from a dictator who can convert American dollars into weapons of mass destruction that will be used against American people.

While opening ANWR may not end dependence on foreign oil, it can substantially reduce it. For example, it can replace all Iraqi imports for the next several decades. It can lower our trade deficit, which has an impact on interest rates, the federal budget, and economic growth.

Oil development in ANWR is locally-supported, as we will hear directly from our witnesses today.

Over the past several years, the federal government has closed off some of the most promising areas from oil and gas exploration on the grounds that such activities lack local support. If this is the government's criterion for oil exploration, then there should be no argument over ANWR.

Unfortunately, I've observed that some of the most aggressive opponents of ANWR are the ones who have declined invitations to the North Slope to view first-hand exactly what they're talking about.

Anyone who visits Alaska will immediately see that, under the State and local government's rigorous environmental rules, wildlife and their habitat have peacefully co-existed with the production of 14 billion barrels of oil for American consumers.

For example, the caribou herd using the Prudhoe Bay oil fields has grown from 5,000 to 32,000 since development began a quarter century ago.

The fact is, no wildlife species population has been adversely affected by Alaska oil development. But don't take my word for this - this is a finding in a recent study by the Argonne National Laboratory. This record can and will be replicated in ANWR.

I previously mentioned that it defies common sense to buy oil from our enemies. It also defies logic to purchase oil from nations having little or no regard for environmental protection. Developing resources and creating jobs here in the U.S. under the world's most stringent environmental standards contributes to cleaner and healthier environment around the world.

I've been to Alaska's North Slope, and I challenge anyone to tell me where else 14 billion barrels can be produced with so little disturbance.

Alaskans treasure their wildlife and their environment as much as we treasure ours. The views of the people who live on Alaska's Arctic coastal plain should be this Committee's highest consideration. They have the most at stake in this debate because they depend on the land for their very survival.

They want to contribute to America's energy security by tapping into ANWR's world-class energy resources. Who better to judge whether or not oil exploration, development and production can be done safely and properly?

Our witnesses today represent a broad spectrum of views on ANWR, and I look forward to hearing their testimony on Mr. Young's bill.

The Chairman now recognizes the distinguished ranking Member from coal mining country, Mr. Rahall of West Virginia.

I'd like to welcome the first panel, consisting of my good Western friend, the Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton.