

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

news release

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## SECRETARY ANDRUS SAYS THERE WILL BE NO EXCUSE IF NATION FAILS TO CONSERVE ALASKA'S WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus said today the Alaskan land bill now before Congress "is the most sweeping and important conservation legislation that any of us will see in our lifetime."

Addressing the 43rd North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Phoenix, Andrus said there would be no excuse for failing to conserve the scenic and wildlife treasures of Alaska.

"Alaska is a second chance for America to act in her own best interest," Andrus said. It is a second chance most nations never get, and if we lose it now, history may forgive us, but our grandchildren won't.

"In the past we have always been able to say that we didn't understand how our natural systems worked; that we had no idea we would use land so quickly, or we had some similar excuse. Today we have the examples of the Lower 48 to show us what may lie in store for Alaska if we fail to act. We have run out of excuses."

Although this month marks the 75th anniversary of the first wildlife refuges established in the Lower 48 states, Andrus pointed out that the refuge idea was first employed in Alaska more than a century ago.

"It was in Alaska where we as a nation made our first significant Federal effort to provide refuge for wildlife in the 19th Century, and now it is in Alaska where we have our greatest opportunities of the 20th Century," Andrus said.

Last fall Andrus proposed that 92.5 million acres in Alaska be designated as national parks, wildlife refuges, wild and scenic rivers and national forests. The Secretary said that this represents the minimum necessary to protect Alaska's scenic and wildlife values. This would leave some 247 million acres -- an area about 2 1/2 times the size of California -- open for development, Andrus emphasized.

The Secretary said one of the most crucial of his recommendations is for enlargement of and wilderness status for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

"This would be the only full cross section of our Arctic region under complete protection," Andrus said, citing the caribou and other rich wildlife resources in the 17 million acre area.

(more)

"Ironically, the Arctic Refuge with perhaps the most unique and most fragile values of all our proposals is also the one which is under the greatest pressure for other uses," Andrus said. "Geologists have identified features near the caribou calving grounds that they say are promising for gas and oil. We took those identifications into account last summer when we were preparing our recommendations. Ultimately we decided that the known wildlife values in the refuge outweighed the possibility of a petroleum strike there. The highest and best use of this land is not exploitation of its finite resources but perpetuation of its renewable resources."

Andrus said that since we know where the important wildlife values are in Alaska, it would be a tragic mistake to risk destruction of these values in the quest for petroleum which may not be present and which remains available elsewhere.

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