

Obama Administration Moves to Protect Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Recommends Largest Ever Wilderness Designation

President Obama's Administration moved to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, widely considered one of the most spectacular and remote areas in the world.

The Department of the Interior released a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and the final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the refuge, which recommends additional protections, and President Obama announced he will make an official recommendation to Congress to designate core areas of the refuge – including its Coastal Plain – as wilderness, the highest level of protection available to public lands. If Congress chooses to act, it would be the largest ever wilderness designation since Congress passed the Wilderness Act more than 50 years ago.

“Designating vast areas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as Wilderness reflects the significance this landscape holds for America and its wildlife,” said Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. “Just like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of our nation’s crown jewels and we have an obligation to preserve this spectacular place for generations to come.”

Based on the best available science and extensive public comment, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s preferred alternative in the CCP recommends 12.28 million acres – including the Coastal Plain – for designation as wilderness. The Service also recommends four rivers – the Atigun, Hulahula, Kongakut, and Marsh Fork Canning – for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Currently, more than 7 million acres of the refuge are managed as wilderness, consistent with the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. Only Congress has the authority to designate Wilderness areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers. Recommendations for Wilderness or Wild and Scenic River designations require approval of the Service Director, Secretary of the Interior and the President.

The Service is not seeking further public comment on the revised CCP/EIS, but it will be available to the public for review for 30 days, after which, the record of decision will be published. At that point, the President will make the formal wilderness recommendation to Congress.

The 19.8 million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is home to the most diverse wildlife in the arctic, including caribou, polar bears, gray wolves, and muskoxen. More than 200 species of birds, 37 land mammal species, eight marine mammal species and 42 species of fish call the vast refuge home. Lagoons, beaches, saltmarshes, tundra and forests make up the remote and undisturbed wild area that spans five distinct ecological regions.

For information about the CCP: <http://www.fws.gov/home/arctic-ccp/>