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Two Thousand Acres

By PAUL KRUGMAN

According to my calculations, my work space occupies only a few square inches of office floor. You may find this implausible, but I'm using a well-accepted methodology. Well accepted, that is, among supporters of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Last week Interior Secretary Gale Norton repeated the standard response to concerns about extensive oil development in one of America's last wild places: "The impact will be limited to just 2,000 out of 1.9 million acres of the refuge." That number comes from the House version of the Bush-Cheney energy plan, which promises that "surface acreage covered by production and support facilities" will not exceed 2,000 acres. It's a reassuring picture: a tiny enclave of development, practically lost in the Arctic vastness.

But that picture is a fraud. Development won't be limited to a small enclave: according to the U.S. Geological Survey, oil in ANWR is scattered in many separate pools, so drilling rigs would be spread all across the coastal plain. The roads linking those rigs aren't part of the 2,000 acres: they're not "production and support facilities." And "surface acreage covered" is very narrowly defined: if a pipeline snakes across the terrain on a series of posts, only the ground on which those posts rest counts; bare ground under the pipeline isn't considered "covered."

Now you see how I work in such a small space. By those definitions, my "impact" is limited to floor areas that literally have stuff resting on them: the bottoms of the legs on my desk and chair, and the soles of my shoes. The rest of my office floor is pristine wilderness.

There's a lesson here that goes well beyond the impact of oil drilling on caribou. Deceptive advertising pervades the administration's effort to sell the nation on its drill-and-burn energy strategy. In fact, those of us following this issue can't see why people made such a fuss about the Pentagon's plan to disseminate false information. How would that differ from current policy?

Remember that this latest push to open up ANWR for drilling follows on the heels of an attempt to portray a plan to do nothing much about global warming as a major policy initiative. What else has the administration said about its energy plans that isn't true?

Top of the list, surely, is the claim that drilling in ANWR is a national security issue, the key to ending our dependence on imported oil. In fact, the Energy Information Administration's preferred scenario says that even a decade after development begins, ANWR will produce only between 600,000 and 900,000 barrels of oil a day — a small fraction of the 11 million barrels we currently import.

Then there's the absurd claim that ANWR drilling will create hundreds of thousands of jobs — a claim based on a decade-old study by, you guessed it, the oil industry's trade association.

But the most nefarious aspect of the administration's energy propaganda is its persistent effort to

link energy shortages to environmentalism — an effort that, it's now clear, has often been consciously dishonest.

For example, last spring Dick Cheney lamented the fact that the U.S. hadn't built any new oil refineries since the 1970's, linking that lack of construction to environmental restrictions. I wrote a column last May pointing out that environmentalism had nothing to do with it, that refineries hadn't been built because the industry had excess capacity. What I didn't know was that several weeks earlier staffers at the Environmental Protection Agency had written a scathing critique of Mr. Cheney's draft energy report, making exactly the same point. The final version of the report, by the way, doesn't say in so many words that clean-air rules cause gasoline shortages — but it conveys that impression by innuendo.

For now, it's possible for diligent citizens to cut through these deceptions — for example, you can read on the Web what the U.S. Geological Survey actually has to say about oil reserves in the Arctic. But I keep wondering when the administration will shut down those Web sites. After all, under John Ashcroft's new rules, agencies are no longer instructed to release information whenever possible; they're supposed to refuse requests to release information whenever there's a legal basis for doing so. And honest assessments of oil reserves in environmentally sensitive locations might be useful to terrorists — you never know.

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