

PowerPost • Analysis

The Energy 202: The other corner of Alaska the GOP wants to open up

By [Dino Grandoni](#) November 27 at 8:52 AM

THE LIGHTBULB

In spearheading their massive tax code rewrite, Republicans have also reopened one of the nation's long-running environmental fights.

Working with the Trump administration, congressional Republicans led by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, are seeking to raise revenue by drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the northeast corner of Alaska. The plan pits Murkowski and other Republicans, who believe Arctic energy development can raise money for their tax overhaul that is their top legislative priority, against environmentalists clamoring to protect caribou and other wildlife in the 1.5 million acre section of the 19 million acre refuge from oil and gas drilling.

But the GOP is also seeking to open up another corner of Alaska to industrial development. Their move has nothing to do with the Arctic refuge, and has received considerably less attention.

On page 169 of the 174-page-long appropriations bill funding the Interior Department, the environment and related agencies including the Forest Service, Murkowski has proposed unraveling a plan issued in waning days of the Obama administration to decelerate old-growth logging in the Tongass National Forest. Murkowski is also chair of the appropriations committee making the decisions on Tongass.

At 17 million acres, the Tongass is just a sliver smaller than the Arctic refuge. But that wilderness, taking up the entire southern end of the Alaska Panhandle, is still the largest national forest in the nation, teeming with brown bears, bald eagles and other wildlife.

Unlike ANWR, the Tongass is not untouched. Resource extraction is permitted in the Tongass and other national forests under guidelines spelled out by the government in land management plans.

For decades in the Tongass, loggers have harvested old-growth timber — that is, forests that have not been significantly cut. Heeding the call of scientists and conservationists seeking to preserve dwindling old-growth habitat nationwide, the Forest Service under Obama finalized in late 2016 a plan that phased down old-growth logging in the Tongass. Both in the Tongass and other national forests, the Obama administration took steps to encourage the cutting of “new growth” forests instead.

But old-growth forests are full of high-quality timber, and the economy in southeast Alaska has historically relied on harvests of spruce and other trees from the Tongass. Murkowski's proposal calls for the Forest Service to revise or amend the 2016 plan. If passed, the Forest Service would revert back to a more logger-friendly 2008 plan in the meantime.

“Every sector of the Southeast Alaska economy needs greater access to the Tongass, but this rule failed to provide it,” Murkowski said in a statement in October of the 2016 land management plan for the Tongass.

Environmental groups, some of which felt the Tongass plan issued by the Obama administration didn't go far enough to protect the pristine parts of the forest, criticized the proposal as a giveaway to the logging sector.

"Senator Murkowski is trying to sneak in anti-environmental policy riders into a massive budget bill intended to allow destructive logging of some of the tallest and oldest trees in our national forests," Alex Taurel, deputy legislative director at the League of Conservation Voters, wrote by email. "This activity and the pollution it causes would harm thriving and sustainable local economies such as fishing and tourism."

But in Washington, the Tongass outcry has not been nearly as loud as that over ANWR.

Murkowski seemed to have chosen a subtler path, too.

At the request of the senior senator from Alaska, the Government Accountability Office ruled in October that the 2016 Tongass plan could be undone under the Congressional Review Act.

Earlier this year, congressional Republicans used the once-obscure law to erase more than a dozen Obama-era administrative regulations with just a simple majority in both chambers.

Once signed by President Trump, CRA resolutions prevent the next presidential administration from issuing "substantially similar" rules.

Under the law, Congress has only 60 legislative days to pass such a resolution after the GAO announced its ruling. Despite the permanent protection for the Alaska timber sector such a measure would provide, the Alaska congressional delegation has so far decided to forgo using the Congressional Review Act for the Tongass.

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POWER PLAYS

-- **Chuck Schumer nixes gas tax hike:** The Senate minority leader says he's against increasing the gas tax in order to raise revenue to offset a new infrastructure bill (if we ever see that initiative). "The bottom line is that we don't want to raise taxes on working people right now," Schumer said in an [interview with The Daily Beast](#). "As it stands now that is where we are at. Income distribution is so bad, I would rather pay for infrastructure by taking the money that comes from overseas [repatriation] and putting it into infrastructure." Trump's top economic adviser, Gary Cohn, had signaled in October that the White House was open to the possibility of raising the excise tax on gasoline, which is currently at 18.4 cents per gallon.

Though not its explicit purpose, some ([though not all](#)) environmental policy wonks cite the side effect of reducing petroleum consumption and, consequently, carbon emissions as one of the virtues of a higher gas tax. Many members of Schumer's caucus, [like Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island and Brian Schatz of Hawaii](#), are clamoring for a tax on carbon itself, but have been [rebuffed](#) by the White House.

-- **Trump vs. the world:** Last week, delegates gathered from nations party to the 1987 Montreal Protocol, a widely celebrated treaty designed to preserve the ozone layer. Last week, the treaty was extended through the Kigali Amendment, which was negotiated last year and late last week and crossed a key ratification threshold allowing it to enter into force in 2019.

While President Obama supported the Kigali Amendment, which aims to limit hydrofluorocarbon pollution from air conditioners and refrigerators, whether the Trump administration would reaffirm that support before the conference was an open question, [according to our colleague Chris Mooney](#).

On Thursday, a State Department official signaled support for it in a statement at the conference, [per Axios](#). "The United States believes the Kigali Amendment represents a pragmatic and balanced approach to phasing down the production and consumption of HFCs, and therefore we support the goals and approach of the Amendment," said Judith Garber, a principal deputy assistant secretary from the State Department told attendees, according to Axios.

-- **The latest on Puerto Rico:**

- **Whitefish Energy resumed operations to repair the electrical grid** in Puerto Rico late last week after the company had halted operations because of a lack of payment from the

island's debt-ridden utility. Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority released a payment to the tiny Montana-based company "that was enough to show PREPA's good faith intent to pay Whitefish Energy and its subcontractors for services rendered," the company said, according to Bloomberg. The company had stopped services last week after saying it was owed \$83 million from the utility. The controversial contract was canceled last month following criticism over how the contract was awarded, but Whitefish was set to continue its work through Nov. 30.

- **“I’m just lying in bed, with the air-conditioning and thinking of my mom:”** As the island continues to recover, its residents continue to grapple with the question of whether to stay or go. From the New York Times: “[T]he population shift poses a potentially much larger challenge for Puerto Rico, as it tries to stagger back not just from the disastrous toll of Hurricane Maria but years of steep economic decline that had left the island beleaguered even before the storm’s landfall on Sept. 20. Many who are leaving are professionals, students and other young people who would be essential to recovery and setting Puerto Rico on a better course.”
- **And this year, the holidays will conjure a different feeling on the island:** From CNN: “For many Puerto Ricans, Thanksgiving is usually the start of a marathon season of revelry that ends around January 6 with Three Kings' Day, when families hold festive gatherings and children leave shoe boxes full of grass -- the equivalent of cookies for Santa -- for the wise men's camels.... So this holiday season, as their fellow Americans on the mainland eat leftover turkey and shop for gifts, many Puerto Ricans will still be struggling just to feed and shelter themselves.”

State attorneys general bash plan to hike national park fees

A group of state attorneys general on Wednesday urged the National Park Service to scrap its proposal to more than double the entrance fee at 17 popular national parks.

Associated Press

OIL CHECK

-- **Is the oil and gas industry is causing Texas's earthquakes? Yes, a "landmark" study suggests:** Mining, dam construction and natural gas extraction are suspected to be causing some of the quakes. Wastewater produced from fracking, for example, can add pressure to existing ancient cracks, reports The Post's Ben Guarino. Although there is no way to detect whether any given earthquake was caused by nature or human intervention, scientists have been studying the relationship between earthquakes and nearby activity. New research, one geophysicist told The Post, "eliminates the possibility, sometimes raised by the oil and gas industry, that the Texas quakes are part of a natural cycle of faults that awaken every few thousand or million years."

-- **Keystone spill status:** TransCanada said it has recovered 44,400 gallons of oil from an Amherst, S.D. spill site after a leak from the Keystone pipeline earlier this month, according to Reuters. The company had shuttered the pipeline that transports oil from Canada to the United States after a leak on Nov. 16. The company also said it tested a water well near the spill site, which was normal, per the report.

-- **Three oil and gas giants pledge to reduce methane emissions:** "Large energy companies including Exxon, Shell, and BP have signed onto a pledge to reduce emissions of methane from natural gas production," reports the Washington Examiner.

The companies didn't announce any specific targets for reducing emissions, but the declaration is likely designed to signal to the world market that the companies want to reduce leaks of the potent greenhouse gas even as the Trump administration tries to roll back methane rules issued by the Obama administration. Doing so, ultimately, means the energy companies capture more natural gas for them to sell.

Trump rejects Icahn-backed bid to change biofuel mandate

The Trump administration is formally rejecting a bid to relieve refiners of their obligation to fulfill annual biofuel quotas, dealing a blow to billionaire investor Carl Icahn and oil companies that had sought the change.

Bloomberg News

THERMOMETER

-- **Sea life beneath Antarctic ice shelf is changing, and warming may be why:** "Scientists diving beneath Antarctica's Ross Ice Shelf have discovered unexpected changes in the seafloor ecosystem, and they think the thinning of the ice shelf caused by climate change may be to blame," reports Tom Metcalfe for The Post. The seafloor below Antarctic sea ice is usually immersed in complete darkness and, consequently, contains sparse plant and animal life. But the thinning of the sea ice has let in more light, allowing the ecosystem to flourish. "What used to be a very stable, sparse and food-deprived animal community on the seafloor under the thick ice in New Harbour is now much richer, with more species and higher densities of animals," one of the researchers, Patrick Degerman, wrote. "Some species rarely observed at this site now appear to be relatively common."

-- **How climate change has upended a town on the eastern edge of Canada:** Over the weekend, Livia Albeck-Ripka at the New York Times published a fascinating profile of Rigolet, Labrador, and how residents of the remote town of 300 are coping with the loss of sea ice that in winter months serves as their "highway" to places to fish, trap and hunt. Public health researchers studying the region say the "disorienting effects of climate change take a toll on the mental health of people along the coast," Albeck-Ripka writes. "Inuit are people of the sea ice. If there is no more sea ice, how can we be people of the sea ice?" one coastal resident told researchers.

-- **The grizzlies are coming to southwestern Montana:** Since 1975, when the bear was listed as an endangered species, grizzlies in the Yellowstone National Park ecosystem to the south have more than quadrupled their range and population while the grizzly population in the Glacier National Park region to the north has also spread out. "But as grizzlies fan out from the parks that have long been their refuges, they are encountering more people, roads and development — and more temptation in the form of trash and livestock," reports The Post's Karin Brulliard in an excellent profile of the region. After the United States spent four decades and millions of dollars to rescue the bears from extinction, experts wonder whether people can live alongside them.

DAYBOOK

Coming Up

- The EPA will hold a public hearing on the proposed repeal of the Clean Power Plan in Charleston, W.Va. on **Tuesday and Wednesday.**
- The Center for Strategic and International Studies hosts an event about the "Status of Carbon Capture 2017" on **Tuesday.**
- The Center for Strategic and International Studies will launch a new energy report on **Tuesday.**
- The Center for Climate and Security hosts a discussion on the security risks of climate change in the Asia-Pacific on **Tuesday.**
- The Heritage Foundation hosts a discussion on the history of climate change activism on **Tuesday.**
- The Brookings Institution holds an event on "Can tax reform include a carbon tax?" on **Tuesday.**
- The New York Times hosts a climate summit in San Francisco on **Wednesday and Thursday.**

- The Natural Gas Roundtable hosts FERC Chairman Neil Chatterjee at its luncheon on **Thursday**.
- The American Enterprise Institute holds an event on "Conservation programs, the waters of the United States, and the Renewable Fuel Standard" on **Dec. 6**.

EXTRA MILEAGE

Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) said he will step down as the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee amid an ethics probe of sexual misconduct claims:

Several lawmakers called for changes to the way Congress handles allegations of sexual misconduct after two prominent Democrats were accused of impropriety:


On 60 Minutes, celebrity chef José Andrés talks about feeding Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria:

The top 4 moments from the Miss Universe pageant:

Watch Jay-Z stop a concert to tell a 9-year-old girl she can be president:

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