

Appeals court halts construction at ConocoPhillips Alaska project

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The logo for ConocoPhillips is displayed on a screen on the floor at the New York Stock Exchange. (Photo: Reuters)

New York, February 16 (RHC)-- An appeals court has blocked construction of ConocoPhillips' \$2 billion-plus Willow crude oil project in Alaska, putting on hold plans for one of the biggest oil projects in North Slope history.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in a weekend order sided with environmental and Native plaintiffs who challenged the Trump administration's go-ahead for ConocoPhillips' Willow project. Trump made oil-and-gas drilling a priority during his four-year term, but his successor, Joseph Biden, has taken several steps to restrict fossil fuel development.

The Trump administration approved the Willow development plan in October. Permits to mine for gravel and build roads were issued on the morning of Jan. 20, just before Biden was sworn in as the nation's 46th president.

The injunction issued Saturday night bars ConocoPhillips from conducting winter gravel mining and gravel road-building for the project while the lawsuit is ongoing. Willow holds 590 million barrels of recoverable oil and could produce up to 160,000 barrels per day as soon as 2024, according to ConocoPhillips' previous estimates. Located on federal land in the National Petroleum Reserve of Alaska, Willow would be the North Slope's westernmost producing oil field.

The 9th Circuit Court order followed a February 6th lower-court order that briefly paused construction. Both orders concluded that ConocoPhillips' gravel work would cause irreparable environmental harm.

Because most North Slope oilfield construction is limited to winter, the appeals court's injunction likely precludes construction until at least January, said Bridget Psarianos, an attorney with Trustees for Alaska, the environmental law firm representing the plaintiffs.

"We are grateful that the court has put a stop to destructive on-the-ground construction and blasting work while our lawsuit makes its way through court," Siquñiq Maupin, executive director of Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic, said in a statement released by Trustees for Alaska.

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