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The Barnett Shale

As the Congress considers whether to follow President Bush's lead in repealing the decades-old moratorium on drilling for oil on the Outer Continental Shelf and in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, it might want to take a look at what's happening in the Barnett Shale region in Texas. The recent history of the Shale, where innovative energy companies have turned a once impenetrable rock formation into the most important natural gas source in America, provides a testament to the professional competence of the engineers and geologists who find and obtain the energy resources that make America's economy possible. It also illustrates just how irrational the Congress's persistent opposition to drilling has become.

In addition to being the largest onshore natural gas field in America, the Barnett Shale sits directly on top of the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, which is home to 6 million people. Companies are drilling for natural gas underneath schools, underneath the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, and underneath residential communities, and the process so far has been a resounding success. The Shale is producing at rates that have exceeded all expectations, and it's being done in a major American city without disturbing the residents who live there. Surely the reindeer in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, on whose behalf much of the resistance to drilling in that area is based, are as amenable to the process of drilling for resources as the citizens of Fort

Worth.

Meanwhile, the Shale's economic impact on central Texas is a reminder that oil and natural gas are not just fueling energy addiction and pollution; these resources also create wealth. While the national economy is suffering, central Texas is experiencing a veritable boom. The annual economic impact of the Shale is \$22 billion, according to a study by the Perryman Group. The Shale has also generated nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars in local and state tax revenues, and has created nearly 100,000 jobs with more on the way. It's made a few billionaires, more than a few millionaires, and lifted thousands of fortunate men and women into sudden affluence. Would not a rational Congress rather these rewards accrue to Americans rather than our enemies in the Middle East?

The reluctance to utilize this kind of wealth when it exists beneath public lands is peculiar to our federal legislators. Alaskans are as free of this senseless inhibition as their compatriots in Texas, but much of Alaska's energy resources, unlike those of Texas, lie beneath land owned by the federal government. The governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, is an outspoken critic of the Federal government's ban against drilling on Federal lands in her state, and, not coincidentally, she enjoys an 84% approval rating.

Only a few years ago, drilling for the gas in the Barnett Shale was considered virtually impossible. "It is far more complicated to ex-

tract natural gas from shale than from other sources of natural gas, like sandstone," a spokesman for Devon Energy, Chip Minty, said. Devon Energy has been active in the Shale since 2002, but until recently other companies have shied away from the area. Exxon Mobil, for instance, was late in buying an interest in the Barnett Shale even though its global headquarters is only a few miles away. Geologists and energy companies have known about the vast natural gas deposits in the Shale for decades, but the tight, almost impermeable nature of shale, a black rock formed from organic deposits 300 million years ago, made drilling there economically infeasible. A few decades of trial and error and a couple of visionary technological innovations later, and the Shale has become the most important natural gas field in America. The history of the Shale, Mr. Minty said, "shows the potential for energy resources across America."

As the Shale demonstrates, the engineers at energy companies haven't exactly been idle in the decades since the congressional bans on drilling were introduced. Oil and natural gas drilling has become safer, less intrusive, and more efficient. In addition to the Shale, Devon Energy produces in the Gulf of Mexico. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped right through their production sites. The storm battered Devon's oil rigs and destroyed a great deal of their infrastructure, but there wasn't a single significant oil spill.

Of course, the Barnett Shale

does not challenge what is the most common — and nonsensical — objection to drilling in ANWR and on the Outer Continental Shelf: "By themselves," one can hear countless politicians say, "these oil sources will not solve America's energy problems." This point does not stand on its own. Its persuasiveness relies on relentless repetition.

Everyone agrees that soaring energy prices are burdening America's economy and empowering dangerous regimes abroad. And yet the most immediate means of relief, drilling for the oil in ANWR and the Outer Continental Shelf, is dismissed on the grounds that it is not a complete solution to the problem. No reasonable person, suffering from thirst, would refuse a glass of water on the grounds that after he drinks it he'll still be thirsty. And yet this is precisely the reasoning informing the political opposition to drilling in ANWR and the Outer Continental Shelf.

America now consumes oil and natural gas at costs that embolden our enemies and weaken our middle class while at the same time prohibiting American companies from drilling where oil is known to exist within our own territory. With every rise in the price of oil, this absurdity becomes ever more tragic. In the case of offshore drilling, it's true enough that the risk of an oil spill cannot be entirely eliminated. But it's a risk that has diminished dramatically in the nearly 20 years since Exxon Valdez, and it's a risk we can no longer afford to forego.