

Alaskan caribou have nothing to do with keeping Iowans warm

By Todd Dorman

DES MOINES – So what’s the difference between the Artic National Wildlife Refuge and a low-income household?

Only one is getting drilled this winter. And the caribou have nothing to worry about.

Allow me to explain.

On Wednesday, Republican leaders in the U.S. Senate stripped a \$2 billion measure from a defense department budget bill that would have provided additional help this winter to low-income households struggling to pay high heating bills.

The GOP took that action after Democrats led an effort to delete a Republican-backed provision in the same bill allowing oil drilling in Alaska’s artic refuge.

The Senate’s move means Iowa will have millions of dollars less to help tens of thousands of low-income households facing staggering natural gas and propane prices. Most of these households fall below the poverty line and many are home to the disabled, seniors and children.

Republicans, including U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, immediately pinned the Scrooge label on Democrats, arguing that revenues from arctic drilling were needed to cover the cost of extra heating help.

Never mind that you’d need a time machine to pay for heating help now with drilling dollars that won’t be generated for three years or longer. Even a caribou knows a snow job when they see it.

And it begs the question whether Republicans wanted drilling more than they wanted to help the poor get through what Iowa officials are calling a wintertime crisis. Arctic drilling may even be a good idea, but joining these issues at the hip is political gamesmanship at its worst.

And just a few days ago — before the Senate took its detour to Pottersville — Republican lawmakers swore we were on the merry road to Bedford Falls.

Last Monday, Grassley and others sent out press releases announcing that \$2 billion in

additional heating help was on the way. None of those cheerful greetings mentioned that the GOP intended to tie the fate of that much-needed aid to the outcome of one of the longest, most contentious environmental debates facing Congress.

It must have slipped their minds. They were too busy trying to sell us a cheery story about how Congress was preparing to load up its sleigh and swoop in just before Christmas to save the day.

“On Baiter, on Switcher, on Shameless and Hoodwink...” But soon, ho, ho, ho was transformed into no, no, no.

Iowa will get the same \$36 million for its Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, that the state received last year. That’s less than the \$50 million Grassley wants to spend on a rainforest, but it will just have to do.

Iowans on the frontlines believe otherwise. There’s a good chance Iowa’s program will run out of money this winter unless Congress reconsiders or the Iowa Legislature steps in with state resources.

Officials say they’ll try to provide the same \$317 benefit to low-income households as they handed out last year. Of course that won’t make much of a dent in heating costs expected to rise 40 percent or more.

The good news is that LIHEAP recipients are shielded from utility disconnections through the winter. The bad news is that protection ends on April 1 and officials fear thousands of Iowans could be cut off.

Even before cold weather arrived, more than 20,000 low-income Iowa households owed past-due utility payments. More debt will pile up this winter.

And if senators lose any sleep over this, all they need to do is count caribou.

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