

**ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * EARTHJUSTICE * NATIONAL
AUDUBON SOCIETY * NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL *
OCEAN CONSERVANCY * SIERRA CLUB * THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY *
WORLD WILDLIFE FUND**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 7, 2009

CONTACTS: Emilie Surrusco, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-341-8787
Emily Blout, Office of Rep. Jim Moran, 202-494-2798

Members of Congress Call for Protection of Alaska's Offshore Waters

WASHINGTON -- Seventy members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter this week to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar urging him to chart a precautionary, science-based approach to offshore oil and gas development in the U.S. Arctic Ocean and declare Bristol Bay off limits to drilling.

The members of Congress made three recommendations to Secretary Salazar: set aside the Bush administration's proposed five-year offshore oil and gas leasing plan; defer leasing and drilling in the Arctic Ocean until a "sensible and balanced" science-based management program can determine if such activities should take place, and if so, how; and permanently protect Bristol Bay from such development.

"My colleagues and I urge the Secretary to take into account this nation's deep interest in promoting sustainable sources of energy- both as a means to preserve America's pristine coastlines and protect our national security," said Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA), who initiated the letter.

The proposed five-year oil and gas leasing plan opens up virtually the entire U.S. Arctic Ocean and Bristol Bay to such activities. Nearly 300,000 people – including 400 scientists from the U.S. and 20 other countries – submitted comments by last month's deadline asking the Obama administration to defer oil and gas development in the Arctic and ban drilling in Bristol Bay.

"The Bush administration's plan was pushed forward despite a basic lack of fundamental information about the impacts of development on the Arctic Ocean and Bristol Bay," said David Dickson, Western Arctic & Oceans Program Director for Alaska Wilderness League. "The Obama administration must be a responsible steward for these two national treasures."

The letter also emphasizes President Obama's commitment to developing sustainable ocean policies through his Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force. Its interim report last month included the Arctic Ocean as one of its nine priorities.

"As the Department of Interior reviews nearly 300,000 public comments submitted in support of protecting offshore Alaska waters, we are pleased that 70 members of

Congress are also weighing in with the Secretary,” said Jessica Ennis, Legislative Associate for Earthjustice. “As the public and now Congress has noted, a second look at the illegal Bush-era five-year plans is the responsible course forward.”

America’s Arctic is home to vibrant Inupiat communities and abundant marine life, including bowhead whales, walrus, ice seals and polar bears. Bristol Bay harbors one of the world’s largest wild runs of sockeye salmon and provides more than 40 percent of the total U.S. seafood.

“Despite its importance, the Arctic Ocean is one of the least understood regions on earth,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, acting Alaska regional director of The Wilderness Society. “We commend the 70 members of the House who have asked that Bush-era decisions to develop America’s Arctic waters be put on hold until a balanced, science-based conservation plan can be developed.”

Climate change is causing the Arctic to warm twice as fast as the rest of the planet, causing a rapid melt of the ice pack. Scientists now predict that summer sea ice could be gone as early as 2013 opening the region to large-scale commercial activities.

“The Arctic is our planet’s air conditioner, and it plays a key role in regulating global climate. Expanding oil and gas activities in a region that is poorly understood and already under enormous stress could have dire consequences, not only for the Arctic, but for the planet as a whole,” said Janis Searles Jones, vice president with Ocean Conservancy.

Oil and gas development pose environmental risks to the Arctic’s ecosystem, from noise that disturbs marine mammals to air pollution from shipping emissions and oil spills. Adequate technology does not yet exist to clean up oil spills in broken ice.

"The Obama administration has a chance now to shift the course set for the Arctic by President Bush and the oil industry,” said Athan Manuel, Director of Public Land Protection for Sierra Club. “If the Arctic's polar bears and wildlife are to survive global warming, they will need all the help they can get. Protecting the area from catastrophic oil spills is absolutely critical.”