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MEDIA ADVISORY

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Contact: Emilie Surrusco, 202-544-5205 or 202-341-8787

Secretary Salazar: Enough is enough in America's Arctic

WASHINGTON - As Interior Secretary Salazar testifies before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee today, Alaska Wilderness League urges him to continue his efforts to develop a comprehensive energy plan for our nation's public lands and offshore. In Alaska, we look forward to working with Sec. Salazar to develop a plan for America's Arctic that includes a timeout for all industrial development in the Arctic Ocean, and keeps places such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Teshekpuk Lake off limits.

"After eight long years of energy policy for and by the oil industry, Sec. Salazar's deliberative approach, that finally gives science and conservation a seat at the table, is a needed change," said Cindy Shogan, executive director of Alaska Wilderness League. "Alaska's two senators, on the other hand, recently introduced a bill that serves as a distraction from the new administration's energy priorities. Rather than join the effort to lead our country toward a clean energy future, Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R) and Sen. Mark Begich (D) are pushing forward with the latest in a long string of attempts to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development."

The Arctic region is already under immense stress from the impacts of climate change – warming in the Arctic is occurring at twice the rate of the rest of the planet. Currently, there are close to 100 million acres across America's Arctic open for oil and gas development.

Even as more areas are opened to development - right now, 73.4 million acres in the Arctic Ocean are in the process of being offered for lease, the largest blocks of Arctic waters yet to be offered - the Arctic remains the 'least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth,' according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. Thus, the environmental and social impacts of oil and gas development have been poorly studied and documented. And, despite the very real risk of an oil spill in the Arctic Ocean – MMS itself has calculated up to a 50 percent chance of a major oil spill in the Chukchi Sea alone – no technology exists to clean up a spill in the Arctic's icy conditions.

Alaska's North Slope tells the real story of oil and gas development with an average of 453 spills annually since 1996, according to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. In 2006, British Petroleum's corrosion problems at Prudhoe Bay caused the largest oil spill in North Slope history – 200,000 gallons of crude oil. Already in 2009, two major spills have released more than 100,000 gallons of crude oil and contaminated waste water onto Alaska's North Slope. Oil development remains a risky and dirty business, in spite of any lessons we may have learned from the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which unleashed 11 million barrels of oil into Prince William Sound 20 years ago this month.

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www.AlaskaWild.org

122 C St NW, Ste 240, Washington, DC 20001 * Tel: 202-544-5205 * Fax: 202-544-5197

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