

**ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE*
EARTHJUSTICE * FRIENDS OF ALASKA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES
*NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY * NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE
COUNCIL * NORTHERN ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER * THE
SIERRA CLUB * THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**THOUSANDS CALL FOR PROTECTION OF OUR NATION'S MOST
EXTRAORDINARY WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE HABITAT**

Public Comment Period Closes for National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska

Today marks the close of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) public comment period to develop its integrated activity plan and environmental impact statement for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve). Today, environmental and conservation organizations submitted a letter with 30 organizations supporting a balanced approach for the Reserve. Additionally, over 175,000 comments were received from the public calling for balanced development and strong protection of the extraordinary biological resources in the Reserve. The Reserve includes some of our nation's most impressive natural resources – it is the largest single block of wild public land in the United States at more than 22 million acres, and is home to a diverse population of migratory birds and other wildlife such as caribou, polar bears, beluga whales, and gray wolves.

When preparing its new areawide plan, BLM will be considering a number of important issues affecting the region, including future oil and gas leasing and development; appropriate protections for two of Alaska's largest caribou herds, long-term impacts of climate change impacts to the Reserve's subsistence resources from possible off-shore oil and gas development in the Beaufort or Chukchi Seas, as well as protection of important waterfowl (including two threatened species) and conservation of internationally-recognized raptor habitats. BLM's planning process will include a review of the following special areas, throughout the Reserve, including: Utukok River Uplands, Colville River, Kasegluk Lagoon, Dease Inlet-Mead River, Peard Bay, DeLong Mountains and Arctic Foothills, Teskepkuk Lake, and Ikpikuk River.

"The new areawide plan provides the Obama administration a critical opportunity to balance future oil and gas development with enduring protection of wildlife and wilderness in the Reserve," said Cindy Shogan, Executive Director, Alaska Wilderness League. Shogan continued, "Given the smart decision to safeguard wildlife and lands around Teshekpuk Lake earlier this year and the thousands of recent comments from people across the country that have shown their support of the special areas – we are hopeful that BLM will produce a balanced plan for the Reserve."

"The Reserve includes shorebird, waterfowl and raptor habitats that are internationally recognized," said Eric Myers, Policy Director, Audubon Alaska. "Sporthunters along the

Pacific Flyaway especially value the Teshekpuk Lake area wetlands, which are a kind of 'duck factory' for several species of waterfowl. And the Colville River is one of the highest-density raptor nesting areas in the world for Peregrine Falcons, Gyrfalcon, Rough-legged Hawk, and Golden Eagle."

"As BP's Gulf of Mexico spill has shown us, oil drilling is a risky activity with spills and industrial activity that harms sensitive wildlife and their habitats," said Pam Miller, Arctic Program Director, Northern Alaska Environmental Center. "The upper Colville and Utukok Rivers and their remote headwaters in the DeLong Mountains and Arctic Foothills provide habitat for bear, wolf, wolverine, and caribou and have important wilderness and wild river values. We need to ensure that special areas are taken off the table as places to drill."

"The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was a tragic display of the imbalance present in managing our shared public resources," said Jessica Ennis, legislative associate for Earthjustice. "As thousands of people commented, BLM should proceed with its new management plan for the Western Arctic through a lens of multiple uses and values. The region's landscapes, made up of essentially undisturbed lagoons, lakes, rivers and mountains, should be protected."

Many Alaskans live off the state's lands and waters, and the Reserve provides vital subsistence resources to its surrounding communities. Ensuring subsistence resources are protected from possible onshore development as well as possible off-shore oil and gas development in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas is crucial to protecting these communities' way of life.

"If the Western Arctic gets developed, critical habitat for tens of thousands of migrating birds and caribou would be industrialized and destroyed," said Chuck Clusen, Director, National Parks and Alaska Projects, Natural Resources Defense Council. "It will look like Prudhoe Bay which has been turned into a maze of pipelines and airstrips. The BLM must protect the Western Arctic's environmentally sensitive special areas."

"Teshekpuk Lake has long been recognized as a special area that should be protected from oil and gas development, but there are other special areas of the Reserve that are also essential habitat for the animals that thrive in the Reserve," said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska Regional Director, The Wilderness Society, "We urge BLM to give these areas the highest protections so that fish and wildlife habitat is not despoiled or fragmented by development."

"The Reserve has incredible wilderness values," said Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director, Sierra Club, "and is at a cross-roads – facing dual threats from fossil fuel development and climate change. People from across the country have spoken out to see that our wildest special places are protected for future generations. We must act now and take a long term vision to ensure protections for this wild and wonderful place."

"Tens of thousands of people across the country have called for stronger protections," said David Raskin, President, Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, "The Reserve is one of our nation's most unique places. We encourage BLM to ensure that a balanced approach to the Reserve is used, so that numerous birds, other wildlife, and large mammal populations can continue to thrive."

The new areawide plan, when finalized, will replace all existing plans and guide future land management throughout the more than 22-million acre Reserve. The 1976 law that transferred management of the Reserve to the Department of Interior requires BLM to balance development with conservation. The purpose of the new management plan is for BLM to identify necessary management actions to guide development while also reducing the impacts to the environment from oil and gas leasing in the Reserve.

Contacts:

Gwen Dobbs, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-544-5205

Eric Myers, Audubon Alaska, 907-276-7034

Karla Dutton, Defenders of Wildlife, 907-276-9453

David Raskin, Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, 907-299-2420

Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club, 907-276-4044

Jessica Ennis, Earthjustice, 202-295-7619

Eric Young, Natural Resources Defense Council, 202-289-2373

Pamela A. Miller, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, 907-441-2407

Nicole Whittington-Evans, The Wilderness Society, 907-272-9453

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