

**ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE * GWICH'IN
STEERING COMMITTEE * NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY * NATIONAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION * SIERRA CLUB * THE WILDERNESS
SOCIETY**

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CONTACTS: Emilie Surrusco, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-544-5205
James Navarro, Defenders of Wildlife, 202-772-0247
Luci Beach, Gwich'in Steering Committee, 907-378-8331
Taldi Walter, National Audubon Society, 202-413-9176
Desiree Sorenson-Groves, National Wildlife Refuge Association, 202-965-6972
Kristina Johnson, Sierra Club, 415-977-5619
Neil Shader, The Wilderness Society, 202-429-3941

Arctic Refuge's 50th anniversary celebration kicks off with call for long-term protection of this unique wilderness icon

WASHINGTON – Congressional champions, Alaska Natives and conservation groups joined together today to kick off a yearlong celebration of 50 years of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, our nation's greatest wilderness icon, while calling for its lasting protection.

This unique event launched a nationwide "Arctic is Alive" celebration that will build to Dec. 6, the day 50 years ago that President Dwight Eisenhower established the Arctic Range as a protected place. Throughout the year, citizens across the country will take part in events that will highlight the vital role that the Arctic Refuge, and its Coastal Plain in particular, plays in our nation's natural heritage – while demanding that Congress designate the Arctic Refuge's Coastal Plain as wilderness.

On Thursday, **Senators Tom Udall (D-NM) and Mark Udall (D-CO)**, together with **Rep. Ed Markey (D-MA)**, talked about the importance of this thriving, verdant wilderness as the center of life for much of our nation's most valued wildlife. The Arctic Refuge's Coastal Plain is the birthing place for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, millions of birds that migrate to all 50 states and six continents, and polar bears who are increasingly losing their sea ice habitat to global warming.

The senators and congressman were joined by **Luci Beach, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee** in Alaska, who spoke about the importance of the Arctic Refuge's Coastal Plain to the people of the Gwich'in Nation, who have protected this land as "the sacred place where life begins" for thousands of years.

Tom Campion, board chair of Alaska Wilderness League and **Bill Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society**, along with representatives from other conservation groups, also shared their perspectives on a place that must have long-term protection from industrial development, once and for all.

Next Tuesday, May 4th, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will be holding an important public scoping hearing in Washington on the Arctic Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan, which could include a full wilderness review and wilderness recommendation for the Coastal Plain and other areas of the Arctic Refuge for the first time in its history.

INDIVIDUAL STATEMENTS:

“We have protected this land for 20,000 years and have considered the calving and nursing grounds sacred,” said **Luci Beach, executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee**, in talking about the importance of the Arctic Refuge’s Coastal Plain to the people of the Gwich’in Nation. “It is good that we are celebrating the wonder of the Arctic Refuge.”

“The Arctic is alive and it’s all around us. The Arctic Refuge’s Coastal Plain is an important birthing place for some of our nation’s most revered wildlife, including birds that migrate to all 50 states and six continents,” said **Tom Campion, board chair for Alaska Wilderness League**. “As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of this magnificent place, the time has come to ensure we can pass it on to future generations just as we found it – untouched, thriving and pristine.”

“As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, we have the historic opportunity to provide wilderness protection to one of the most intact and untouched Arctic ecosystems in America,” said **Brian Moore, Legislative Director for National Audubon Society**. “The biologically rich coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge represents only five percent of Alaska’s North Slope, most of which is available for oil and gas development. Providing permanent protection to the coastal plain demonstrates a balanced approach for managing our nation’s Arctic resources and supports the founding purpose of the refuge: preserving this unique ecosystem for future generations.”

“The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the last great natural ecosystem in our country and the only refuge in a system of over 550 whose establishing purpose is to ‘protect Wilderness values’,” said **Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. “As a nation we have an obligation to protect its integrity for future generations and designate the refuge’s coastal plain as Wilderness, taking it off the table for development once and for all.”

“From polar bears to caribou to migratory birds, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been a safe haven for some of the planet’s most wondrous wildlife,” said **Mary Beth Beetham with the Defenders of Wildlife**. “But nearly 50 years after being set aside to protect wildlife and natural resources, the refuge’s coastal plain is still targeted for oil and gas development. We’ve seen enough damage caused by oil spills, such as the Exxon Valdez and most recently the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, to know that drilling here jeopardizes the future of this remarkable place. The refuge deserves real wilderness protections.”

“The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is under constant threat from oil and gas development,” said **William H. Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society**. “The Gwich’in people have kept this land unspoiled for generations – and along with champions like Chairman Markey and Senators Mark and Tom Udall, we’ve been able to protect this pristine area for 50 years. But as a nation, if we cannot protect this spectacular place from drilling, what can we protect? All of this sanctuary should be designated as wilderness before it is too late.”

“Over the decades the American people have fought to protect this treasure in the face of many threats. Together, we’ve fought back repeated attempts from the oil industry to lay waste to the Refuge’s pristine habitat,” said **Debbie Sease with Sierra Club**. “But until the Refuge receives permanent protection, we will always risk losing it to Big Oil.”