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Another Arctic Refuge drilling advocate moves closer to joining Team Trump

WASHINGTON, DC (September 19, 2017) – Today the U.S. Senate Energy Committee approved the nomination of former Alaska Department of Resources Commissioner Joseph Balash to be Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Land and Minerals Management.

The organizations named above issue the following statement in response:

“The Trump administration is waging an all-out assault on public lands across America, and we are appalled by its latest efforts to explore for oil and then sell off the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to industry. Only Congress can authorize drilling in the Arctic Refuge, and we are confident that as the American people become more aware of this threat, they will demand the refuge be permanently protected.”

[As revealed by *The Washington Post*](#) on Sept. 15, the Trump administration has been working on a secret plan to obtain approval to explore for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Balash would be a key member of the [team that is being assembled](#) to advance Trump’s pro-drilling agenda.

At the very least, Balash’s nomination makes the administration’s Arctic Refuge assault team nearly complete, and all three members are well-versed on Alaska resource development, including two former commissioners of Alaska’s Department of Natural Resources:

- **Alaska Sen. Dan Sullivan**, a pro-drilling Republican, was elected to the Senate in 2015 after first being appointed Alaska’s attorney general by former Gov. Sarah Palin, and later becoming commissioner of the state’s Department of Natural Resources.
- **Balash** was recently nominated by Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke to serve as Interior’s Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management. Balash most recently served as Sullivan’s chief of staff and was formerly commissioner of Alaska Department of Natural Resources.
- **David Bernhardt**, Trump’s Interior Deputy Secretary, was once a key aide to then-Secretary of Interior Gale Norton and was involved in the doctoring of scientific findings about effects of oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, according to documents released earlier this year by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. When Alaska Sen. Frank Murkowski in 2001 asked Norton for an evaluation of the potential impacts of oil drilling on the Porcupine Caribou Herd, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report was extensively rewritten in Norton’s office to omit and manipulate scientific information to result in a document more favorable to drilling. At that time, Bernhardt was Norton’s counselor and director of congressional affairs for her office. He was also retained by the state of Alaska to serve as its lawyer in the lawsuit regarding exploration in the coastal plain.

Additionally, Alaska Gov. Bill Walker—an independent who is up for re-election in 2018—and his current Alaska DNR Commissioner, Andy Mack, are aggressively pursuing the opening of

federal lands in the Arctic to oil development with the strong support of Alaska's other U.S. Senator, Lisa Murkowski, who leads the Senate Energy Committee.

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