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Trump ramps up reckless assault on the Arctic Refuge

Hasty environmental review ignores human rights and public support for protections

Washington, D.C. - On the eve of the one-year anniversary of the tax act that opened the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling, The Bureau of Land Management released its draft environmental impact statement (EIS) in preparation for an oil and gas lease sale in 2019 within the ecologically sensitive coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, America's premier wilderness refuge. This is the latest move by the Trump administration in a rushed process to allow drilling in one of the nation's most remote and iconic landscapes.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration [announced](#) it would develop a leasing EIS with the aim of finalizing it in early 2019, and they have recklessly charged ahead with their arbitrary and expedited timeline. Analyzing scientific data, examining the true negative impacts drilling would have on the landscape and wildlife, and engaging in meaningful dialogue with local communities and stakeholders cannot be rushed. This hurried process is incompatible with protecting the subsistence needs of the Gwich'in people who, for thousands of years, have depended on the Porcupine Caribou that migrate through the Refuge to calve in the Coastal Plain. To the Gwich'in, the Coastal Plain of the Refuge is known as "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit," The Sacred Place Where Life Begins. Drilling the Coastal Plain would forever scar the landscape and eviscerate the way of life for the Gwich'in.

At 19.3 million acres, the Refuge is an amazing, wild landscape home to some of the most diverse and stunning populations of wildlife in the Arctic—including polar and grizzly bears, wolves, and the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Nestled between the foothills of the Brooks Range and the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean, the Arctic Refuge's coastal plain contains the most important land denning habitat for

polar bears across America's Arctic coast. Birds from all fifty states migrate to the Refuge, including the Snowy Owl and Semipalmated Sandpiper.

An overwhelming majority of Americans support protections for the Arctic Refuge. Yet in 2017, after decades of bipartisan support for the Refuge, Senate Republicans forced a provision into their tax bill to mandate an oil and gas leasing program in the Refuge without meaningful debate. Publicly, the administration promised a fair and robust review process. In reality, it has placed arbitrary deadlines and limitations on the environmental review every step of the way. In the time since the tax bill became law, the Interior Department has pushed forward with an aggressive timeline for Arctic Refuge drilling that reflects the Trump administration's eagerness to sell off our public lands to the highest bidder and allow the coastal plain of this premier wildlife refuge to be turned over to oil companies.

STATEMENTS FROM NATIVE AND CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS:

"The Gwich'in nation opposes any development in the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd," said **Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee**. "The rush and fast pace that they are moving in only proves that they have no intention of addressing our concerns. Ninety-five percent of the Arctic is opened to oil and gas. Leave the remaining five percent alone. Our animals need somewhere clean and healthy to go. That's what the coastal plain provides: A refuge for our animals. The Gwich'in have a cultural and spiritual connection to the porcupine caribou herd. Drilling in the arctic refuge is a direct attack on our way of life."

"Of all of the Trump administration's conservation rollbacks, the drive to sell off one of America's wildest places for dirty, high-risk oil-drilling ranks among the worst," said **Jamie Williams, president of The Wilderness Society**. "Americans have no desire to drill the Arctic Refuge, and this action is pure pandering to special interests in the oil lobby. Americans want to balance our energy needs with conservation of some places that are simply too wild to drill. Millions of acres in Alaska have already been opened for drilling under the Trump administration, and some places should remain untouched for future generations. The process laid out in the plan is rushed and reckless, defying good science and meaningful dialogue with stakeholders. A mere 52-day review for a plan that purports to drill for oil in the crown jewel of our wildlife refuge system shows the administration isn't at all serious about avoiding permanent damage to this untouched landscape. We urge Congress to act early next year to withdraw the 2017 tax bill rider that Americans never asked for and do not support."

"The Arctic Refuge is an ecosystem that is becoming more – not less – vital for birds and wildlife as development and a changing climate chip away at their habitat," said **Sarah Greenberger, senior vice president of conservation policy for the National Audubon Society**. "With most of America's Arctic coastline already open for oil and gas development, it's inexplicable that we are considering destroying

one of our last wild places. Every American is connected to this piece of our national heritage, by virtue of the birds that fly through our backyards to one of our most prolific bird nurseries. Maybe that's why two thirds of Americans representing both major political parties oppose drilling in the Refuge."

"Mining oil and gas from the Arctic Refuge makes no sense in climate terms," **said Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition council member and ecologist Dr. Julianne Warren.** "It would potentially add more carbon to the atmosphere and oceans in two intersecting ways, which would be incompatible with a safely habitable ecosphere. First, burning any new below-ground reserves would discharge more ancient stores of carbon. Second, damaging one of the healthiest, intact lifescapes remaining on Earth would emit the carbon it is built from. Not only is protecting the ecological integrity of the Refuge critical, restoring other already destroyed ecosystems world-wide is urgently needed to sequester more atmospheric carbon. Ultimately, I believe that defending life and the interpenetrating local and global conditions of life--including long interdependent Alaska Native Peoples--is a primary, sacred duty. This duty means no more drilling anywhere, especially in the Arctic Refuge. It means just transition from climate irresponsible to healthy energy economies."

"Despite promising a robust, scientifically-sound review process, the administration is racing to authorize drilling," **said Patrick Lavin, Alaska senior representative for Defenders of Wildlife.** "By placing arbitrary deadlines and limitations on the environmental review, the administration is making clear that it is working for Big Oil, not the wildlife and people who rely on the coastal plain for survival. There is no need to industrialize this treasured landscape, and no excuse for short-circuiting the review process."

"There is no way there will ever be enough oil to value the destruction of a People and a pristine ecosystem as productive and precious as the Arctic Refuge coastal plain," **said Carol Hoover, executive director of the Eyak Preservation Council.** "Don't deny this – oil exploration on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will destroy a Native People and their human rights. Destruction of habitat for traditional food sources essentially amounts to cultural genocide. That is no way for the American people, much less Alaska, to go forward."

"Nothing could be more reckless than drilling for oil in a wildlife refuge," **said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity.** "Once we industrialize our last great Alaskan wilderness areas, there's no going back. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is where we must make a stand against Trump's ignorance and greed. Here is where we protect our environment or accept climate chaos and the extinction crisis."

“Their rush to check the boxes of the environmental review process and sell off the Arctic Refuge to oil interests as soon as possible is further evidence of this administration’s total disregard for Indigenous rights and the value of America’s wild places,” said **Alli Harvey, Alaska representative for Sierra Club’s Our Wild America campaign**. “When Donald Trump and Ryan Zinke look at the Arctic Refuge, they may see nothing but dollar signs, but the American people see much more than that. The Arctic Refuge is sacred to the Gwich’in Nation and an important symbol of the wild. That’s why the plan to open this place up for drilling is so unpopular with the public, and pressure is growing on oil companies and the banks that fund them not to buy what this reckless administration is selling. We will continue to stand with the Gwich’in people and fight back against this scheme to sell out America’s Refuge.”

“This administration is hell bent on drilling the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. At a time when our leaders should be focused on avoiding catastrophic climate change, they are running headlong toward it, inviting tragic consequences for the Arctic,” said **Earthjustice President Abigail Dillen**. “Oil and gas drilling in the coastal plain will imperil wildlife such as the threatened polar bear. It will violate the human rights of indigenous Gwich’in people who rely for their way of life on the caribou that depend on the unspoiled Arctic Refuge habitat. It will bring irreversible harm to a cherished landscape valued by people around the world. Earthjustice stands prepared to uphold bedrock environmental laws and defend this precious place from the disastrous whims of the Trump administration.”

“The Trump administration is trying to hastily push through this reckless oil and gas program, regardless of the law and impacts to wilderness and wildlife,” said **Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney for Trustees for Alaska**. “It defies the will of the majority of Americans who want this wild place protected. It undermines the science and agency process required to protect our lands, waters, wildlife and people. It disregards the human rights of the Gwich’in people. You can bet we will go through the BLM’s draft EIS with a fine tooth comb and stand with the Gwich’in people in fighting any oil and gas activity in the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge.”

“The Arctic Refuge was founded in part to preserve unique arctic wildlife, and the coastal plain is integral in that protection. It offers a vital birthing ground, nursery, and insect relief for the Porcupine caribou herd. Though some claim that caribou can and have co-existed with oil development on the North Slope for decades, co-existing and thriving are not the same, and the geography of the habitat the coastal plain provides makes development here especially unacceptable,” said **Lisa Baraff, program director at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. “The rush to move forward with the administration's plans has disregarded the ecological, geographical, and cultural realities of this complex place, not to mention the powerful legacy of protection it represents.”

"In its zeal to drill the Arctic Refuge the Administration is racing to poach public lands for private interests," said **Geoffrey Haskett, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. "For nearly 70 years the overwhelming majority of Americans have favored protecting the Arctic Refuge, their views reflected in bipartisan support to keep oil wells out of the refuge. But pro-drillers in Congress couldn't be up-front with the American people so they used a back-door budget bill to authorize drilling in the refuge last December," he continued. "The Interior Department promised a rigorous environmental review but instead marginalized the wildlife expertise of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who has managed the Arctic Refuge since 1960 and empowered the Bureau of Land Management to expedite leasing," Haskett explained. "Arctic Refuge--like all of Alaska's 16 federal national wildlife refuges--is protected by law as "*National Interest Lands*" that belong to all Americans, not just Alaskans. But the way this administration and Congress have favored private interests over the public interest means Americans' conservation heritage is at-risk like never before."

"Sadly, the Trump administration still hasn't seemed to process the message Americans delivered on election day," said **Adam Kolton, executive director at Alaska Wilderness League**. "So far, at least 35 members of Congress who voted in favor of a tax bill that included Arctic Refuge leasing were defeated. Polls have shown that swing voters in battleground districts opposed Refuge drilling by a 64-23% margin. This continued rush to drill America's largest and wildest refuge is deeply unpopular, morally wrong, and threatens to turn back the clock on clean energy progress. Nineteen new House members have already pledged not to take a dime of fossil fuel money. It's vital that the new Congress, on day one, take steps to ramp up oversight over the backroom dealing and sidestepping of environmental laws that have defined this administration, and begin the work of restoring protections to a national treasure that belongs to all Americans."

"The impacts from oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge would not stop at the U.S. - Canada border," said **Chris Rider, Executive Director of Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Yukon**. "Drilling in the Porcupine Caribou herd's calving grounds could have devastating impacts across Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. It's critical that Canadians stand with the Gwich'in and say no to drilling in the Arctic Refuge."

"The word 'refuge' means 'a place that provides shelter and protection,'" said **Niel Lawrence, Alaska director for the Natural Resources Defense Council**. "Oil and gas exploration would mean the exact opposite—threatening wildlife and leaving these lands forever marred. To open up this sacred place to that is an assault not just on one of the last truly wild places on the planet, but also on the human rights

of the Gwich'in. The environmental community will stand with these indigenous people challenging every step of this rushed process to cast open America's largest remaining wilderness to corporate polluters."

"The American people recently took to the ballot box to deliver a strong rebuke to President Trump and Republicans in Congress and their agenda of selling out our public lands to the highest bidder," **said Alex Taurel, Conservation Program Director at the League of Conservation Voters.** "Poll after poll has shown that people in this country strongly oppose turning the pristine Arctic National Wildlife Refuge into an industrial oil field. We condemn this administration's headlong rush to drill, which would permanently scar one of America's most majestic landscapes that is home to polar bears, the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and birds that migrate to all fifty states. We stand with the Gwich'in people in their efforts to continue preserving this place that is sacred to them."

"Rushing forward with a potentially disastrous plan for industrial oil development in one of the most pristine wilderness areas left on the planet makes no sense, especially given the increasing availability of far cleaner and more efficient energy from renewable sources," **said Ed Johnson, President of Environment America.** "With the expansive rise in solar and wind power, we don't need fossil fuels anymore, and Americans can protect our special places, such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the next generation."

"There is no moral guidance from the Trump Administration," **said Matt Krogh, Extreme Oil Campaign Director of Stand.earth.** "With failed leadership from the White House, people need to make corporations act responsibly. The only right thing to do is to leave the Refuge in peace, starting by making sure the environmental review fully assesses all environmental, climate, and cultural impacts."

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