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Lawsuit filed over Trump administration's 2017 Western Arctic lease sale

Groups challenge BLM's failure to look at environmental impacts

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA – Today, the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society filed a lawsuit in federal district court against the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management challenging a 2017 decision to issue oil and gas leases in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, also known as the Western Arctic.

The administration offered more than 10 million acres of land at the 2017 lease sale—the largest number ever offered in the reserve—without taking a close look at the negative environmental impacts the lease sale and future development would have on fish, wildlife, subsistence and habitat.

"The ecosystems in and around these lease sale areas support rich biodiversity and have provided subsistence resources for thousands of years," said Lisa Baraff, Program Director, Northern Alaska Environmental Center. "Their continued protection requires checks and balances be built into the leasing process to ensure BLM adequately evaluates and is able to prohibit activities that would cause environmental harm. We will continue to work for a just and sustainable future which does not further burden Arctic communities and landscapes."

The lease areas included sensitive wildlife habitat around the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, one of the largest and most ecologically significant wetland areas in the world.

"Combined with efforts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil and gas drilling, this lease sale was about the Trump administration's wholesale approach to selling off our public lands," said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska regional director for The Wilderness Society. "BLM is trying to turn over the Western Arctic to oil companies without any regard for the environmental consequences. That is illegal and unacceptable."

The reckless pursuit of oil in the Arctic is a threat to wildlife in the region, including caribou, polar bears, and millions of birds that migrate annually from every continent to rear their young in the reserve. The Trump administration is threatening to open additional ecologically-sensitive areas in the reserve to expanded oil and gas development, while at the same time ignoring the fact that existing oil and gas activities in the reserve are having serious impacts to fish, wildlife, and subsistence.

"The current management plan for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska was built on a foundation of broad public input, and it recognized special areas of critical importance that must be protected. The Trump administration's decision to offer every inch of available land in the western Arctic for lease without regard to potential serious harm to wildlife or wildlife habitat flies in the face of good decision-making and is instead incredibly reckless," said Kristen Miller, Conservation Director at Alaska Wilderness League. "Donald Trump has made clear that no inch of America's Arctic should be left off-limits to development. We see it in the Reserve. We see it in his administration's offshore plan that opens the entire Arctic Ocean to drilling. And we see it in his tag-team push with Congressional leadership to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge."

BLM ultimately sold about 80,000 acres of the 10 million acres offered, putting into question the economics of drilling in the Arctic in the first place. The lawsuit filed today is not about the size of the sale, however, but rather about BLM's failure to address its obligation to assess environmental impacts and prohibit activities that cause harm.

"We cannot afford to drill first and ask questions later," said Alli Harvey, Alaska representative for the Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign. "The Western Arctic is among the country's last remaining wild places, and the Arctic is on the front edge of the devastating consequences of a warming climate. The impacts of ill-conceived decisions now will have long-term ramifications for people who rely on these landscapes, the American public, and wildlife."

The lawsuit claims BLM violated the National Environmental Policy Act by failing to take a close look at the potential impacts of development before leasing. The purpose of this litigation is to ensure that BLM protects and fully considers the impacts of industrial activities on important wildlife, habitat, subsistence, and other resources in the Western Arctic before it makes decisions now and in the future.

"There are irreplaceable wildlife values at stake in the Western Arctic," said Pat Lavin, Senior Alaska Representative at Defenders of Wildlife. "Congress understood that and required BLM to bring a careful and balanced management approach to the area, but here the agency is leaping into leasing lands without looking first at the wildlife impacts that will follow."

Plaintiffs are represented by the public interest environmental law firm Trustees for Alaska.

"The Trump Administration is in such a rush to sell off our public lands to the oil and gas industry that it isn't even taking the time to comply with the law," said Suzanne Bostrom, staff attorney for Trustees for Alaska. "This lawsuit is about making sure that the agency meets its legal duty to look at the impacts of oil and gas development on fish and wildlife before it makes decisions."