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Groups sue Trump agencies for illegal approval of massive Arctic oil & gas project

BLM and FWS unlawfully approve ConocoPhillips' Willow proposal despite known harms to people & wildlife

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Six groups [filed a lawsuit](#) today in U.S. District Court charging the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Interior Department with illegally and prematurely authorizing the massive Willow oil and gas project in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. BLM approved the project despite its harms to Arctic communities, public health, and wildlife, and without a plan to effectively mitigate those harms. The suit also challenges the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for underestimating Willow's harm to protected polar bears.

BLM's record of decision greenlights the ConocoPhillips Willow proposal despite a lack of information about the project, and while acknowledging intense, long-term and harmful impacts to food access, traditional activities, sociocultural systems, and public health in Arctic communities in and around the Reserve. The people of Nuiqsut in particular would endure increased air pollution, repeated blasting, and continued rapid industrialization that would lead to significant physical and mental health harms.

"The true cost of oil and gas extraction can be seen in rising health related issues, respiratory illnesses, and rare cancer clusters all over the Arctic Slope," **said Siqiñiq Maupin, executive director of Sovereign Inupiat for a Living Arctic.** "We have seen severed family connections, once thriving subsistence use areas too toxic to hunt or gather from, and our traditional practices and diet being eradicated because of the fossil fuel industry."

The Willow project would significantly expand ConocoPhillips' extensive oil and gas extraction operation in the Arctic. Willow includes a new oil and gas processing facility, massive satellite drill pads with up to fifty wells on each pad, a spider web of roads, a new airstrip, pipelines, and two gravel mines within a protected river setback and requires barging and delivery of giant modules over a newly-constructed Colville River ice bridge. ConocoPhillips has not applied for any permits from BLM, meaning the Trump administration is taking the unprecedented step of authorizing a project before it even has a complete permit application.

Today's lawsuit charges BLM with violating the National Environmental Policy Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and FWS with violating the Endangered Species Act by allowing the Willow project to proceed despite projections that it would seriously injure or kill polar bear cubs.

"Trump's Interior has ushered this destructive project forward without reasonable measures to prevent harmful and deadly outcomes for people and wildlife," **said Bridget**

Psarianos, staff attorney for Trustees for Alaska. “This premature authorization of Willow enables ConocoPhillips to drain more oil from the Arctic while putting all the burdens on Arctic communities. BLM’s unjust process to reach this decision disrespects local people while ignoring the agency’s legal obligations to serve the public interest, to fully consider environmental impacts, and to engage in an informed and transparent decision-making process. This is another unfortunate example of this administration using a corrupt process that places corporate greed ahead of Alaska’s people and the law.”

The public interest non-profit law firm Trustees for Alaska filed the suit in Anchorage, Alaska, on behalf of Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic, Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society.

Group statements:

"After near-unanimous local opposition at every stage of the review process and scientific consensus that we must leave remaining fossil fuels in the ground in order to protect our livable climate, it is appalling that BLM is attempting to move forward with this massive extraction project," **said Elisabeth Balster Dabney, executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.** "We are taking this decision to court to stand with the people whose health, food security, and cultural sovereignty would be most impacted by the Willow project."

“The Willow project puts at risk the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, threatening an essential cultural area and food source for North Slope communities and the calving grounds for the Teshekpuk Lake caribou herd,” **said Kristen Miller, conservation director at Alaska Wilderness League.** “Fast-tracking Willow during a global pandemic has shown a complete lack of consideration for local communities like Nuiqsut, or for the impact increasing oil and gas development will have in the region. And conducting a NEPA analysis before ConocoPhillips has even applied for a permit reeks of the Trump administration rubber-stamping Conoco’s wish list before the political winds shift.”

“We are heading to court to stop the U.S. Department of the Interior’s brazen rush to drill anywhere it can in the Arctic,” **said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska program director of Defenders of Wildlife.** “The massive Willow project threatens the future of imperiled Southern Beaufort Sea polar bears, other wildlife and people that call the Arctic home. As the Arctic continues to melt at alarming rates and the signs of climate change are all around us, the agency has just doubled-down on its plan to drill in the Arctic.”

“Simply put, the Bureau of Land Management has epically failed in its requirements to fully disclose the negative impacts of this enormous development project and to mitigate harm,” **said David Krause, Alaska assistant director for The Wilderness Society.** “The fragile lands and waters of the Western Arctic are globally significant habitats that are culturally important to local communities. As the Department of the Interior works to simultaneously tear apart the reserve’s entire land management plan and conservation protections, we’re committed to holding government and industry accountable.”

"The Trump administration has been relentless in their efforts to allow the fossil fuel industry to operate unchecked in the Arctic, regardless of the impacts to communities and the environment," **said Dan Ritzman, director of the Sierra Club's Lands Water Wildlife campaign.** "Today we continue the fight to hold them accountable for their reckless rush to sell off the Arctic to corporate polluters."

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