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Groups rush to court to stop ConocoPhillips' Willow project winter road construction and gravel mining

ANCHORAGE (AK)— Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic and five allied groups filed a motion in U.S. District Court today requesting a preliminary injunction and temporary restraining order to stop ConocoPhillips from starting winter road construction and gravel mining for its Willow project.

“We have experienced rising health issues, and the dismantling of traditional practices and food sources because of oil extraction and industrialization on the Arctic Slope,” **said Siqñiq Maupin, executive director of Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic.** “We have experienced the silencing and paternalism of public agencies that are supposed to listen to us fully, to understand and take into consideration our concerns, and to protect the health and well-being of all of us, not just the profit interests of corporations. We need the exploitation of the Arctic to stop, and the prioritization of our health and well-being to begin again.”

Trustees for Alaska filed the motion as part of Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic’s current lawsuit filed in [November](#). The motion calls out the U.S. Bureau of Land Management for approving permits without taking a hard look at impacts as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. This failure is due largely to the fact that BLM did not even have permit applications from Conoco when doing its analysis. It also challenges the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s failure to ensure impacts to polar bears will be mitigated.

“BLM has been playing permitting whack-a-mole by rubber-stamping Conoco’s permits as they come in, and basing its actions on its prior approval of the project,” **said Bridget Psarianos, staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “The fact is that the agency’s approval is founded on an illegal and deficient environmental impact statement. BLM has never had even close to the necessary details to do a proper NEPA analysis of impacts and harms. Now that it finally has the permit applications and those details in hand, it by law needs to go back and do the analysis it never did in the first place.”

Conoco applied for its permits and rights-of-way to drill in December. BLM is quickly approving the permits, enabling ConocoPhillips to build roads and mine for gravel this winter. Today's motion spells out how road construction and gravel mining pose immediate threats to fish, wildlife, wetlands, and the community of Nuiqsut. Willow would further pose risks to threatened polar bears, and the FWS failed to properly consider ways to mitigate those harms when issuing its Biological Opinion.

The motion asks the court to stop all Willow construction activities until it has time to evaluate the entire case. It also requests a ruling on the injunction by Feb. 1, the day before Conoco intends to begin winter construction activities.

Law firm Trustees for Alaska represents six clients in the lawsuit: Sovereign Iñupiat for a Living Arctic, Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society.

Find the motion's memorandum [here](#).

Client statements:

“Throughout the Willow approval process, BLM has ignored the concerns of local communities regarding the impact that increasing oil and gas extraction will have in the region,” **said Kristen Miller, conservation director at Alaska Wilderness League.** “This administration's fast-tracked process has absolutely failed to adequately address risks to our climate future, the health and safety of people, or the land, water and wildlife that they depend on. It needs to be halted immediately and re-examined.”

“We are asking the court to hit the brakes on the massive Willow project,” **said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska program director, Defenders of Wildlife.** “The project threatens the future of imperiled Southern Beaufort Sea polar bears, other wildlife, and people that call the Arctic home. It is time we stop industrializing the Arctic, destroying critical wildlife habitat, and locking in decades of unnecessary carbon pollution.”

“The Willow project has been a bad idea, poorly executed, from its inception,” **says Lisa Baraff, program director at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.** “Any massive infrastructure development of this scale must be held to the highest standard of review, given all we know about the impact of fossil fuel extraction on the already rapidly warming Arctic. This process has strayed far from that standard, instead relying on incomplete data and the systematic silencing of frontline communities. We remain committed to supporting robust public process and thorough scientific review, as required by law.”

“BLM's analysis of the Willow Master Development Plan is deeply flawed and does not fully account for the tremendous harm this project would cause to globally significant wildlife habitat and culturally irreplaceable areas,” **said David Krause, assistant state director for The Wilderness Society.** “We will not silently stand by as BLM rubber-stamps destructive, carbon-polluting projects that harm public lands and local communities.”

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