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Groups await their day in court after judge rules against injunction in Arctic Refuge case

ANCHORAGE (AK)— The Gwich'in Steering Committee and allied groups await their day in court after a U.S. District Court decided not to grant their request for an injunction that would have prevented the U.S. Bureau of Land Management from authorizing winter seismic work and issuing leases of lands in the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

“Today’s ruling is disappointing but does nothing to change the strength of our lawsuit or our resolve,” **said Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee.** “We will fight to protect the lands that nourish the Porcupine caribou herd and our people, no matter how long it takes or where it takes us. This administration steamrolled through a disrespectful, harmful, illegal leasing plan, and we plan to stop it. While that didn’t happen today, that day will come.”

Trustees for Alaska submitted the motion for a preliminary injunction in December as part of the Gwich'in Steering Committee’s lawsuit filed in [August](#). The motion argued that planned oil industry seismic work and the issuance of leases under the expansive lease terms and rights of the Jan. 6 lease sale posed immediate threats to Arctic lands, animals, and communities. The administration has tried to turn over the coastal plain to private oil and gas interests, no matter the consequences to people and animals, and despite ongoing litigation that calls out the deeply flawed analysis used when approving the leasing program.

The court found that leasing itself does not pose imminent harm. It did not rule on seismic and other on-the-ground activities, leaving the door open for future legal action.

“Our case is still strong and our lawsuit will move forward, along with all the work we do with clients and partners to keep oil and gas out of sacred lands in the Arctic Refuge,” **said Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “This administration has disrespected the public process from day one, and its approval of an illegal leasing plan results from its

disregard of science, the law, public transparency, and engagement with frontline communities for the purpose of pandering to industry interests. We look forward to fully presenting these flaws to the court and unwinding this destructive program.”

Law firm Trustees for Alaska represents 13 clients in the lawsuit: Gwich'in Steering Committee, Alaska Wilderness League, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society-Yukon Chapter, Defenders of Wildlife, Environment America, Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, National Wildlife Federation, National Wildlife Refuge Association, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Wilderness Watch.

Read the court's decision [here](#).

Client statements:

“We are disappointed that the court's decision allows the Trump administration to move forward with its reckless effort to trample the human rights of the Gwich'in and Iñupiat people and destroy the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge,” **said Karlin Itchoak, Alaska state director for The Wilderness Society**. “The administration is turning a blind eye to those who have occupied and stewarded these lands for thousands of years. This lease sale is opposed by the majority of people across the nation. The administration is blatantly rushing the process of securing leases for the oil industry before Inauguration Day. Allowing the leasing of lands sacred to the Gwich'in is wrong for Indigenous rights, it's wrong for our climate, and it's wrong for America.”

“Each year, wildlife migrates between Alaska and the Yukon without concern for national boundaries,” **said Chris Rider, executive director of CPAWS Yukon**. “If the survival of these animals is threatened by development in the Arctic Refuge, it would be devastating for all Canadians. We are extremely disappointed by today's decision, and now we must hope that there's still enough time to undo this flawed process before it's too late.”

“It's been clear from the beginning that the Trump administration has failed to follow the law as they've pushed to exploit the coastal plain for oil, and today's decision is unfortunate,” **said Lisa Baraff, program director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. “We will continue to work for permanent protections for the coastal plain, ensuring that sacred lands are no longer used as political capital, but recognized for their inherent cultural, spiritual, and ecological values.”

“We are disappointed that the Court failed to halt the BLM plan to permit the desecration of the Coastal Plain,” **said Dr. David C. Raskin, president of the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges**. “This incomparable natural resource must be preserved for the future of the Gwich'in people who depend on it for sustenance and for its incomparable wildlife and habitat. We will continue our fight and ultimately stop this misguided and mismanaged effort to give away our national heritage to the highest bidder.”

“This decision allows destruction on the coastal plain while our case is being made,” **said Nicole Schmitt, executive director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance**. “While we are confident the court

will ultimately see this process as illegal, we are disappointed that it will allow people and wildlife to suffer in the interim.”

“The Biden administration has committed to protecting Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and we look forward to working with the new administration to protect our nation’s most iconic wildlife refuge and the rights of Indigenous people that rely on the land,” **said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska program director, Defenders of Wildlife.** “We will not give up this fight and will continue our fight in the courts.”

“Despite today’s decision, we feel confident the courts will ultimately find the Trump administration’s Arctic Refuge drilling scheme to be illegal, violating bedrock environmental laws and shirking its responsibility to protect the food security of Indigenous peoples and the refuge’s irreplaceable wildlife and wilderness values,” **said Adam Kolton, executive director of Alaska Wilderness League.** “We are also emboldened that we will soon have a new president in the White House who ran on and was elected on a clear promise to protect this national treasure for future generations.”

“We are extremely disappointed in this ruling today,” **said Geoffrey L. Haskett, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association.** “The BLM has held a flawed public process based on political pressure, not science. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should never be open for leasing, exploration or drilling. We will continue to fight for the Arctic Refuge and to stop any attempts to destroy this pristine landscape, which will be the result should oil and gas extraction take place.”

“We will continue to fight to preserve the Arctic Refuge with greater resolve so that it will remain wild forever,” **said Fran Mauer, Alaska chapter representative for Wilderness Watch.** “If industry and its subservient public officials are allowed to despoil America’s wildest place, nowhere on Earth is safe from their greed.”

“Drilling for oil in the Arctic’s coastal plain doesn’t make sense economically or ecologically,” **said Collin O’Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation.** “The subsistence way of life for the Gwich’in and the critical Arctic habitat that support iconic wildlife will continue to be threatened. We will continue our fight in court, and look forward to working with the incoming Biden-Harris administration to permanently protect this crown jewel of wildlife refuges.”

“We are deeply disappointed by today’s decision, but we recognize this process is not over and are ready to continue to press for the right action,” **said Environment America Public Lands Director Ellen Montgomery.** “It has been clear from the beginning that the Trump administration was rushing this ‘going out of business’ sale without regard for process or public opinion. This dangerous lease sale should have never even been contemplated. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is too special to destroy for any amount of oil. We will never stop pressing for permanent protection for this special place because this wild land and the caribou, polar bears and other wildlife who live in it deserve to thrive unbothered by seismic testing, pipelines and spills.”

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