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**Alaska Wilderness League * Center for Biological Diversity * Defenders of Wildlife * Earthjustice *
Eyak Preservation Council * Friends of the Earth * Gwich'in Steering Committee * League of
Conservation Voters * National Audubon Society * National Wildlife Federation * Natural Resources
Defense Council * Sierra Club * Trustees for Alaska * The Wilderness Society * World Wildlife Fund**

Indigenous and conservation groups support House reconciliation language that would repeal Arctic Refuge drilling program

Washington — The Natural Resources Committee of the U.S House of Representatives has completed its mark-up of budget reconciliation language that includes repeal of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge oil and gas program and a buy-back of all existing leases. The language will now be merged into the full reconciliation bill and taken up by the full House.

Background:

The Arctic Refuge oil and gas program was created via the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which was passed in 2017 through the reconciliation process. Language contained in the tax bill directed the Interior Department to initiate an oil and gas development program and mandated two lease sales projected to yield \$1.1 billion for the U.S. Treasury. That budget estimate has now been tested in the real world by a January 2021 lease sale, the results of which were an absolute failure. No major oil companies showed up to bid, only nine tracts were sold out of 22 offered, and the sale generated a mere \$12 million — less than 1% of the revenue that was projected. Per-acre bid prices were projected in 2017 to be \$2,250 — in reality, the average price per acre was just \$27.67, literally pennies on the dollar.

Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is bad business, to the point where dozens of the world's largest banks — including the six largest in the U.S. and five largest in Canada — have put policies in place against financing Arctic Refuge oil. The remote nature of the refuge, the global appetite to limit climate pollution, the negative impacts oil development would have on the region's Indigenous communities and wildlife — combined, these make drilling on the coastal plain a dangerous and expensive risk that's not worth taking.

Quotes:

"On behalf of the Gwich'in Nation of Alaska and Canada, we thank the House Natural Resources Committee for listening to the voice of our people and starting down the road to restoring protections for Izhik Gwats'an Goondaii Goodlit, the sacred place where life begins, our sacred lands in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," **said Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee.** "For four years the Gwich'in people had our concerns ignored and rights trampled by an administration concerned only with bowing down to oil and gas interests, but we have trusted in the strength and knowledge of our ancestors and elders to overcome these adversities. Now we call on

Congress to continue to push forward and finish the job of restoring protections to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain.”

“When Congress opened the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas leasing in 2017, the American public was promised billions in federal revenue. Those projections were laughable then and those doubts were vindicated by a January lease sale that failed spectacularly,” **said Kristen Miller, Alaska Wilderness League’s acting executive director.** “It’s impossible today for anyone to credibly argue that Arctic Refuge oil is going to result in a jobs and revenue bonanza. Today’s markup advances bill language that imposes some much-needed fiscal common sense and long overdue action to reverse the fire sale of the crown jewel of our National Wildlife Refuge System.”

“Kudos to Congress for working to restore protections to the Arctic Refuge and its threatened wildlife,” **said Kristen Monsell, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.** “Polar bears desperately need a reprieve from the Trump administration’s death sentence. Alaska’s last wild places have to be put permanently off-limits to the rapacious oil industry or we’ll lock in climate chaos for generations to come.”

“We’re thrilled to see the budget effort to repeal the Arctic Refuge drilling program and buy-back existing leases move forward,” **said Nicole Whittington-Evans, director of Defenders of Wildlife’s Alaska Program.** “Developing this National Wildlife Refuge for oil and gas is simply bad business with unacceptably high costs to people, wildlife and the environment.”

“We applaud Chairman Grijalva, Rep. Huffman, and the other leaders on the House Natural Resources Committee for taking this vital step to reverse a dangerous, risky and expensive provision gutting protections for the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge and allowing new oil drilling projects – which all major U.S. banks have since agreed not to finance,” **said Earthjustice President Abbie Dillen.** “The Trump-era plan is a waste of taxpayer funds and threatens the culture and food security of the Gwich’in Nation. Today’s repeal language would rightly remove it from our federal budget law.”

“Drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was never a good idea,” **said Environment America Public Lands Director Ellen Montgomery.** “With no major oil companies present at the initial lease sale and six of the largest U.S. banks announcing that they will not fund any new oil and gas development in the Arctic Refuge, the leasing program is a waste of taxpayer dollars that comes with catastrophic consequences for the caribou and polar bears that make the refuge their home. The House Natural Resource Committee’s actions toward reversing the program are a move in the right direction.”

“Oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was pushed through over the objections of impacted Alaska Native Communities and the general public under the false assumption that lease sales would generate over a billion dollars in profit. The first sale generated less than one percent of the projected revenue,” **said Nicole Ghio, Senior Fossil Fuels Program Manager for Friends of the Earth.** “Ending the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge oil and gas program and buying-back all existing leases is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.”

“Opening the Arctic Refuge to drilling is a bad deal for taxpayers, people, and the climate,” **said League of Conservation Voters (LCV) Conservation Program Director Alex Taurel.** “We stand in solidarity with the Gwich’in people in this fight against the wasteful and destructive oil and gas leasing program. It’s time for Congress to act to repeal the drilling provision in the 2017 Tax Act and today, the House Natural Resources Committee got us one step closer. We are thankful to Chair Grijalva and House Democrats for prioritizing this critical piece of legislation and look forward to working with them to ensure that this sacred landscape isn’t industrialized at bargain-basement prices.”

“Selling off the Arctic Refuge for drilling would trample Indigenous rights, destroy critical ecosystems, and exacerbate the climate crisis. It also makes no financial sense,” **said Sierra Club Lands Protection Program Director Athan Manuel.** “Buying back these leases and keeping drills out of this priceless wilderness is just plain common sense, and we applaud House Democrats for their leadership to stop this wasteful leasing program.”

“This leasing program attempts to cater to fossil fuel interests by desecrating a wildlife refuge and lands important to Indigenous communities and ways of life and held sacred by the Gwich’in Peoples of Alaska and Canada,” **said Suzanne Bostrom, staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “Its implementation was illegal, disrespectful to human rights, oblivious to the climate crisis, and a fiscal policy disaster. Congress must repeal this unlawful, fiscally irresponsible leasing program now.”

“No amount of revenue could justify the destruction of lands that sustain the Indigenous Gwich’in and Iñupiat communities of the Arctic, but January’s lease sale proved beyond a doubt that the Arctic Refuge oil and gas leasing program was more than a violation of human rights—it was also a raw deal for taxpayers,” **said Karlin Itchoak, Alaska state director for The Wilderness Society.** “It is vital that Congress act to repeal the drilling provision in the 2017 Tax Act to ensure that the coastal plain isn’t plundered at bargain-basement prices, and we urge all House members to support this effort during the budgeting process.”

“Boosters of leasing in the Refuge promised taxpayers the moon, but the opening auction was a bust,” **said Garrett Rose, staff attorney at NRDC (the Natural Resources Defense Council).** “No major oil company showed up, and the sale raised a mere \$12 million—a far cry from what polluters and their allies promised—and just one more reason industrializing this special place is a terrible idea. This is an opportunity for Congress to reverse that bad move.”

We are glad to see leaders in the House Natural Resources Committee have included repealing the Arctic Refuge oil and gas leasing program within the mark-up,” **said Marshall Johnson, Interim Chief Conservation Officer at National Audubon Society.** “The Arctic Refuge is a vibrant yet fragile ecosystem supporting millions of birds, including Tundra Swans and threatened Spectacled Eiders. Congress should protect it as part of our nation’s natural solutions infrastructure to mitigate global climate change instead of selling it off as part of a leasing program that is neither profitable nor responsible.”

“We applaud the House Natural Resources Committee for righting the wrong-headed decision to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration, which threatened both the Gwich’in people and iconic wildlife such as polar bears, caribou, and musk oxen,” **said Mary Greene, public lands**

attorney for the National Wildlife Federation. “There are simply no good reasons to destroy this crown jewel of wildlife refuges with reckless oil and gas development.”

“Allowing oil and gas leasing and development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was a mistake that needed to be corrected. We are encouraged that Congress is now taking bold action to rectify it,” **said Alejandro Pérez, Senior Vice President, Policy and Government Affairs, World Wildlife Fund.** “The lease sale held under this 2017 tax law generated less than 1 percent of the revenue projected, so we now have confirmation that this drilling program was not only environmentally irresponsible, but fiscally flawed as well.”

Media Contacts:

Corey Himrod, Alaska Wilderness League, 202-266-0426, corey@alaskawild.org
Rebecca Sentner, Audubon Alaska, 907-276-7034, rebecca.sentner@audubon.org
Rachel Brittin, Defenders of Wildlife, 202-286-4149, rbrittin@defenders.org
Becca Bowe, Earthjustice, 415-217-2093, rbowe@earthjustice.org
Carol Hoover, Eyak Preservation Council, carol@redzone.org
Brittany Miller, Friends of the Earth, 202-222-0746, bmiller@foe.org
Courtnee Connon, League of Conservation Voters (LCV), 727-744-4163, cconnon@lcv.org
Mary Jo Brooks, National Wildlife Federation, 303-549-8351, brooksm@nwf.org
Anne Hawke, Natural Resources Defense Council, 646-823-4518, ahawke@nrdc.org
Gabby Brown, Sierra Club, 914-261-4626, gabby.brown@sierraclub.org
Dawnell Smith, Trustees for Alaska, 907-433-2013, dsmith@trustees.org
Tim Woody, The Wilderness Society, 907-223-2443, tim_woody@twc.org
Lauren Gleason, World Wildlife Fund, 202-495-4319, lauren.gleason@wwfus.org