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Indigenous, allied groups go to court to stop issuance of Arctic Refuge leases

Preliminary injunction calls out flaws in leasing plan analysis and decision

ANCHORAGE (AK)—The Gwich'in Steering Committee and 12 allied groups filed a motion in U.S. District Court today [requesting a preliminary injunction](#) to stop the U.S. Bureau of Land Management from issuing any leases sold in the Jan. 6 sale of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and from authorizing seismic exploration activities.

“The outgoing administration’s attempt to sell-off sacred lands in the last throes of its term is an act of violence toward the Gwich’in people, our way of life, and our survival,” **said Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee**. “Today we asked the court to stop this violation of human rights and desecration of sacred lands. Tomorrow, and the day after that, and an infinite number of days after that, we will fight as our ancestors did to protect the lands that nourish the Porcupine caribou herd and our people.”

Trustees for Alaska filed the motion for a preliminary injunction in the Gwich’in Steering Committee’s current lawsuit filed in [August](#). The motion calls out the administration’s unprecedented rush to turn over the coastal plain to private oil and gas interests on its way out the door, despite ongoing litigation and the deeply flawed analysis it used when approving the leasing program. The threat of seismic activity this winter and the expansive lease terms and rights proposed for the sale show that there is immediate threat to Arctic lands, animals, and communities if leases are issued.

“This attempt to sell-off the Arctic Refuge is destructive to human rights, the climate, public health, the health of wildlife, and the integrity of the public process,” **said Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska**. “Every action leading up to this scheduled January lease sale has demonstrated a dangerous disrespect for public interest and transparency, from the way the law got tucked into a tax bill, to the disregard of science and engagement with those most impacted, to this lame duck effort to hand over sacred land to oil and gas interests on

the way out of office. This administration has not paused once to listen, to be thorough, or to fix what's broken in this appalling leasing plan, so we have asked the court to stop it from issuing leases.”

The motion requests the court to rule on the injunction by Jan. 6.

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 memorandum in support of the motion [here](#).

Client statements:

“The Trump administration’s relentless pursuit of a lease sale and destruction of the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge forces us to seek a preliminary injunction to protect this irreplaceable landscape and preserve the human rights of the Gwich’in and Iñupiat people who have stewarded their cultural and traditional homelands for thousands of years,” said **Karlin Itchoak, Alaska state director for The Wilderness Society**. “This administration has ignored the will of the people in a last-ditch effort to hold this lease sale before Inauguration Day. It must be stopped.”

“The Porcupine caribou herd is a lifeblood to Gwich’in communities in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and a keystone of Canada’s Arctic ecosystems,” said **Malkolm Boothroyd, campaigns coordinator for the Yukon chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society**. “We must defend the Porcupine caribou from the U.S. Government’s last-ditch attempt to auction the Arctic Refuge away to oil companies.”

“We remain committed, on behalf of our membership, supporters, and partners, to pursuing every legal option to protect the coastal plain from the Trump administration’s exploitation. We stand with the Gwich’in Nation as they defend sacred lands, and with the hundreds of Alaskans who have spoken up at every opportunity to defend cultural sovereignty, sound science, and robust public process,” said **Lisa Baraff, Program Director at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. “The January 6 lease sale was announced in the middle of an open call for nominations, which further demonstrates the lack of interest in public input. It is unconscionable that even on its way out the door, the administration is still dismissing the human rights of the people who would be the most impacted by drilling in the coastal plain, and the wishes of the vast majority of Americans who wish to see the Arctic Refuge protected.”

“This flagrant violation of the public process to ram through destructive oil and gas leasing of the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge is an unconscionable assault on its incomparable wildlife and habitat, the traditional lifestyle and culture of the Gwich’in Nation, and the overwhelming desire

of the American people to preserve this intact ecosystem for future generations,” said **Dr. David Raskin, president of the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges**. “This eleventh-hour, last-ditch effort to thwart the overwhelming opposition of the American public for purely political purposes will be defeated by the legitimate stakeholders, just as it has been many times since the Refuge was established by ANILCA in 1980. We will not allow the rights of the public to be trampled by this flawed process that flies in the face of the many laws and regulations that are designed to enhance and preserve our national heritage.”

“We will not stand idly by while the Trump administration auctions off the wildest place left in America at bargain basement prices,” said **Adam Koltun, executive director at Alaska Wilderness League**. “This lease sale has been scheduled for early January for the sole reason that the Interior Department wants to get mineral rights in the hands of oil companies before President-elect Biden, who has promised to protect this national treasure, takes office. President Trump’s going out of business sale is not only morally wrong and fiscally calamitous but patently illegal, violating several bedrock environmental laws as well as the GOP Tax Act itself.”

“For 117 years, the National Wildlife Refuge System has provided wildlife habitat for species from insects to whales, and no place is as sacred or contains the wealth of wildlife species as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” said **Geoffrey L. Haskett, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. “This Administration is giving away the most sensitive and critical habitat in the entire Refuge System, and it demonstrates their complete and utter disdain for the value these lands provide not only to Alaska, but for migrating wildlife through the rest of the United States. We cannot tolerate the destruction of these lands in such a callous and opportunist manner.”

“The impacts of opening the coastal plain, once done, cannot be reversed,” said **Nicole Schmitt, the executive director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance**. “The coastal plain is critical for the Porcupine caribou herd, polar bears, thousands of birds, and other keystone arctic species already under pressure from climate change. This is too important to be rushed through by political whims, both for the future of Alaska’s wildlife and for those, like the Gwich’in, who depend on it.”

“This administration has cut corners, ignored public input and turned a blind eye to Indigenous rights,” said **Nicole Whittington-Evans, Alaska program director for Defenders of Wildlife**. “Development of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will forever harm Indigenous culture and the irreplaceable wildlife values the refuge was created to protect. This is an injustice that must be stopped.”

“This rush to sell oil leases on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain, before Trump leaves office, is yet another violation in a public process that has been fraught with flaws from the beginning, and it must be stopped,” said **Fran Mauer, representative for the Alaska chapter for Wilderness Watch**. “The Arctic Refuge has remained ecologically whole since the beginning of time. Its coastal plain is the sensitive birthplace of the Porcupine Caribou Herd that

has sustained Indigenous people for millennia and can continue to do so if it is not exploited for oil development. At a time of growing awareness of the existential threat from burning fossil fuel, halting this ill-conceived lease-sale will be a great step toward making peace with our Planet that sustains all of life.”

“The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a vast, seemingly endless land where time slows down,” **said Ellen Montgomery, public lands campaign director for Environment America.** “In contrast, the Trump team is wildly racing the clock in an attempt to open this splendor to drilling. We hope the courts put a halt to the administration's mad dash, starting with an injunction against new leasing.”

“Trump administration officials left us no choice but to go to court to stop the illegal issuance of oil and gas leases, without proper scientific review or full public participation,” **said Tracy Stone-Manning, associate vice president for public lands at the National Wildlife Federation.** “The headlong rush to destroy one of the last truly wild places in the world threatens Indigenous communities, iconic wildlife, and would further accelerate climate change impacts.”

“In their rush to sell off the Arctic Refuge for drilling, the Trump administration has ignored expert input, public opposition, and Indigenous rights,” **said Sierra Club campaign representative Mike Scott.** “This reckless fire sale is a cynical attempt to lock in lease terms that are bad for everyone except drillers.”

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