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WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

June 19, 2018

Submitted via email

Nicole Hayes

Attn: Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program EIS

222 West 7th Ave., Stop #13

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Scoping Comments re: Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program

Dear Ms. Hayes,

The following comments are submitted by Wilderness Watch in response to the public notice from April 20, 2018, Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program, Alaska, 83 Fed. Reg. 17562 (Apr. 20, 2018).

Wilderness Watch is a non-profit conservation organization that focuses through education and advocacy to assure that our National Wilderness Preservation System is protected and administered according to the letter and spirit of the Wilderness Act.

Wilderness

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is widely recognized as our nation's preeminent wilderness because of its wildness (nature is not controlled), ecological diversity and vast scale. From the beginning of a movement in the early 1950's to preserve this region of Alaska, the intention was that the ecological and evolutionary processes, that have existed here from the beginning of time, would be allowed to continue unhindered by humans.¹ Later, in 1960 the Arctic National Wildlife Range, which included the coastal plain, was established "*for the purpose*

¹ Roger Kaye. Last Great Wilderness: The Campaign to Establish the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Univ of Ak Press. 2006.

of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values.”² These purposes remain in effect and must be incorporated in assessment of impacts in the EIS.

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) designated approximately 8 million acres to the south of the coastal plain as Wilderness, and added over 9 million acres to the Range. It also required an assessment of wildlife and potential petroleum resources of the coastal plain as well as a report to Congress (Section 1002h). In 1987, the Report to Congress determined that “*The wilderness character of the coastal plain would be irretrievably lost.*”³ This statement was premised on the recommendation that the entire coastal plain be opened to oil and gas leasing. The BLM must acknowledge this loss in the EIS and analyze the effects so that the American people can be fully informed.

Many recreational visits to the Arctic Refuge involve river float trips starting high in the Wilderness area to the south of the coastal plain and travel north to the coast. Those participating on such trips come for a wilderness experience and to witness the various transitional landscapes and associated wildlife as one travels from the mountains to the Arctic Ocean. Such a trip provides a unique experience because the entire route is currently unblemished by roads, and other facilities associated with oil operations. The EIS must clearly describe and assess how such an experience will be impacted if travelers encounter oil exploration and production activities and facilities. These impacts must be assessed within the context of the 1960 purpose to “preserve wildlife, wilderness and recreational values.”

The Refuge’s designated Wilderness area lies adjacent to the southern and eastern boundaries of the coastal plain. Most of the adjoining designated Wilderness is higher in elevation than the coastal plain where oil and gas development activity may occur. Because the distance from the Wilderness boundary to the Beaufort Sea coast is only 10 to 30 miles, one can see across the entire coastal plain from many elevated locations within the Wilderness. Impacts to the wilderness character within the Wilderness will occur from developments such as roads, seismic trail scars on the tundra, pipelines, drill pads, production facilities, gas flaring, road dust, air pollution and other factors that will impair visual aesthetics. Other impacts to the wilderness character of the adjacent Wilderness will also occur from noise and smells emanating from development activities on the coastal plain. The environmental statement should provide a geographic depiction

² Public Land Order 2214

³ Clough et al. 1987. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, coastal plain resource assessment – Report and recommendation to Congress of the United States and final legislative environmental impact statement; Wash. D.C. page 164.

showing the view shed within Wilderness that would be impacted, so that the public is informed of the extent of impacts.

The coastal plain has often been acknowledged as the “biological center” of the Arctic Refuge. Many wildlife species such as birds, caribou and fish migrate from the coastal plain to other parts of the Refuge, and beyond to other parts of the world. Impacts associated with oil leasing and development that may result in diminished wildlife populations and disrupted movement patterns will extend far beyond the coastal plain. Such influences will also affect the wilderness character of the designated Wilderness and those areas in the Refuge that are not currently designated, but have been determined to be suitable for designation. In 2015, President Obama transmitted his recommendation to Congress that the coastal plain, as well as most of the remainder of the Arctic Refuge not currently Wilderness be designated.⁴ The EIS must analyze how oil leasing will also impact the wilderness character of the remaining areas of the Refuge beyond the coast plain.

Wildness and the Arctic Refuge as a Scientific Control Area

When a conservation area was first considered for northeast Alaska, proponents recognized that one of the values this area would have is to serve as a scientific control area which would allow evaluation of impacts resulting from human activities and development occurring elsewhere in the Arctic region.⁵ Since its establishment in 1960 to the present, the Arctic Refuge has remained essentially free of human developments and has functioned as a control area.

The Refuge founders also recognized the value of allowing ecological and evolutionary processes to continue unhindered by humans. This principle is also referred to as “wildness” because it allows for nature to remain autonomous. Wildness is the most essential element of wilderness, where the intention is to allow nature to remain free of human interventions or to be “untrammelled.” Many Americans cherish true wildness, even if only knowing that it still exists in the Arctic Refuge.

The 2015 Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Refuge identifies several special values including:

Wilderness Characteristics: “Arctic Refuge exemplifies the idea of wilderness- to leave some remnants of this nation's natural heritage intact, -wild and free of the human intent to control, alter, or manipulate the natural order....”

⁴ Ltr. From the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate (Apr. 3, 2015).

⁵ Collins, GL, ,and L.Sumner . 1952. Arctic Research Laboratory, Progress Report. 1 and 2.

Ecological Values: “The distinguishing ecological aspect of the Refuge-and a major reason for its establishment is that this single protected area encompasses a wide range of arctic and subarctic ecosystems, their unaltered landforms, and native flora and fauna. The Refuge is a place of free-functioning ecological and evolutionary processes, exhibiting a high degree of biological integrity, natural diversity, and environmental health....”

Scientific Values: “As intended, the Refuge has become a natural laboratory of international importance. The ecological processes, natural diversity, and free function of natural communities in the Refuge provide unsurpassed opportunities for scientific understanding of wildlife, ecology, geophysics, and the changing climate.”

The EIS should explain the importance of the Refuge with regard to wildness, ecological and scientific values. It must also explain how these values will be impacted or lost entirely due to oil leasing and development. The value of the Refuge in functioning as a scientific control area must also be addressed in the EIS. The implications of no longer having the capability to make scientific comparisons with developed areas in the Arctic region must be presented in the EIS. This capacity, afforded by the wildness of the Arctic Refuge, is especially valuable to science in the future as the global climate continues to warm, and as oil development continues to expand across the north slope west of the Refuge.

Implementation of the Arctic Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans

The Fish and Wildlife Service completed the first CCP in 1988. It was revised in 2015 in accordance with Section 304 (g) of ANILCA. Each CCP must, among other things, identify various wildlife populations, habitats, and special values within the Refuge, as well as establish management goals and objectives for conserving resources and values. It also determines what types of uses are compatible with refuge purposes. The plan includes a review of lands that may be suitable for wilderness designation and it provides recommendations for wilderness designation.

While the CCP provides over-all guidance for stewardship of the Arctic Refuge, many of the “on the ground” aspects of the plan are to be implemented through “step down” plans designed to address specific management issues.

During the development of the first CCP in the 1980’s, many public comments were made regarding the need for appropriate management of increasing public use. This is especially the case in river corridors where impacts such as crowding, camp site impacts and diminished wilderness experiences are occurring. Public

concerns were also raised with regard to proliferation of new air strips, increased hunting pressure and the removal of structures at Lake Peters that are incompatible with the newly designated Wilderness. Commitments were made in 1988 to address these concerns in subsequent step-down plans. However, by 2015 when the revised CCP was finalized, none of the issues raised in the first plan had been addressed. During the 1980's nearly all refuge staff effort was allocated to dealing with the mandated Section 1002 studies of the coastal plain.

The 2015 revised CCP also identified several of the same stewardship issues previously raised in the 1980's . The revised plan again committed to address these issues in subsequent step-down plans. The current CCP claims that a visitor use management plan and a Wilderness stewardship plan will be initiated "immediately upon implementation of the Revised CCP" and will be completed in three to five years. The revised CCP also provides a schedule, and estimates that the visitor use management and Wilderness stewardship plans will be completed by 2018. So far there is little or no indication of these plans being initiated and they certainly will not be completed by 2018.

The EIS must realistically describe the very likely impact that oil leasing and development will have in causing further delay and neglect of important stewardship issues at the Arctic Refuge. In addition, the EIS must explain how further neglect of basic stewardship responsibilities will continue to degrade wilderness character, recreational values and lead to increased impacts to wildlife and habitat. It must also acknowledge that oil leasing and development, will drastically destroy fulfillment of the purposes for which the Arctic Refuge was established.

No Action Alternative:

The EIS must include a No Action Alternative because it will enable the American people to clearly understand the consequences of destroying our nation's greatest remaining place for wildlife, wilderness and future generations.

Conclusion:

History has shown and this comment period will no doubt reinforce, that the American people have a deep-seated desire to protect the Arctic Refuge from development. Wilderness has shaped our national character and there is something about wild, untouched pristine landscapes that still touches our soul. Nowhere in our country harbors these wild values the way the Arctic Refuge does, and any effort to develop it will destroy an essential part of our nation's character. The EIS will be remiss if it fails to capture the irreparable damage to our character if development occurs on the coastal plain.

Sincerely,

Fran Mauer
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