

**Statement of Bernadette Demientieff, Executive Director, Gwich'in Steering Committee to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources hearing "The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain" on H.R. 1146, The Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act**

**March 26, 2019**

Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on this very important piece of legislation, the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act, H.R. 1146.

Shrooshii Bernadette Demientieff oozhii, I am the Executive Director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee. I am Gwich'yaa Gwich'in and a member of the Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Government from Fort Yukon, Alaska. My mother is Betty Flitt from Fort Yukon. My great grandmother was Marcis (Horace) Moses from Old Crow, Yukon Territories, Canada, and my grandfather was Daniel Horace from Fort Yukon. I have five children and five grandchildren. I am here at the direction of my elders on behalf of the Gwich'in Nation of Alaska and Canada.

Founded in 1988, the Gwich'in Steering Committee is the unified voice of the Gwich'in Nation speaking out to protect the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We represent the communities of Arctic Village, Venetie, Fort Yukon, Beaver, Chalkyitsik, Birch Creek, Stevens Village, Circle, and Eagle Village in Alaska, and Old Crow, Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik, and Inuvik in Canada. Our work is to protect the Coastal Plain from any disturbance or destruction.

Protection of the birthing and nursery grounds on the Coastal Plain is a human rights issue for the Gwich'in Nation. Our human right is upheld by the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states, "by no means shall a people be deprived of their own means of subsistence." This principle must be respected. We rely on the Porcupine Caribou and the Porcupine Caribou rely on the Coastal Plain as their calving and nursery grounds. Oil and gas activities on the Coastal Plain is a direct attack on our ways of life and to our human rights.

We call the Coastal Plain "*Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit*" — "the Sacred Place Where Life Begins." This name demonstrates the great significance of this area to the Gwich'in people. We are caribou people. We believe that we each have a piece of caribou in our heart and the caribou have a piece of us in their heart. There was a time when we were able to communicate with the caribou and there was a vow that we would take care of each other. To honor this, we have been taught that we must take care of the caribou and that, in turn, the caribou will take care of us. This spiritual connection we have with the caribou is very real. The survival of the Gwich'in depends on the survival of this herd.

The caribou are the foundation of our culture and our spirituality — they provide food, clothing, and tools, and are the basis of our songs, stories, and dances. The ancestral homeland of

the Gwich'in and the migratory route of the caribou are identical.<sup>1</sup> For thousands of years, we migrated with the caribou. When we were forced to settle in villages, we settled along the migratory route. If you look at the map attached to this statement, you will notice that one place that the caribou go that we do not is the Coastal Plain. This area is sacred to our people, so sacred that during the years of food shortage we still honored the calving grounds and never stepped foot on the Coastal Plain

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge is very important to the caribou. Drilling there would cause lower birth rates and threaten migrations, risking everything we hold dear. Pregnant females come to the Coastal Plain to give birth in May and early June. They have up to 40,000 calves in a two-week period. The food on the Coastal Plain helps the mothers recover from birth and provides rich milk and nutrition for the new calves. Mosquitos can kill a newborn calf. The breezes on the Coastal Plain protect the calves from being attacked. The Coastal Plain also has fewer predators than areas to the south. A calf that is only a few days old can run faster than a wolf, but there would be a significant risk to the caribou if they had to leave the Coastal Plain to have their calves and raise them in other areas where there are more predators.

Our elders recognized that oil development in the Porcupine Caribou Herd's calving and nursery grounds was a threat to the Gwich'in people. That is why, in 1988, our Nation came together for the first time in over a hundred years. Our elders called together the chiefs of all of the Gwich'in villages for a traditional gathering. We gathered in Vashraii K'oo and decided that we would speak with one voice to protect the Coastal Plain. That unified voice is expressed in a formal resolution, Gwich'in Niintsyaa.<sup>2</sup> This resolution calls on the United States to recognize the rights of the Gwich'in to continue our way of life and permanently protect the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. We come together every two years to reaffirm our commitment to protecting the Coastal Plain. We convened last summer in Tsiigehtchic, Northwest Territories, Canada. We sang, we danced, we shared food and stories. During the Gathering, our Nation voted unanimously to reaffirm our commitment to protecting the calving grounds.

Our elders directed us to "do it in a good way." Following their guidance, the Gwich'in Steering Committee has worked for over three decades to protect this sacred place so that our people have a future in our homelands. Protecting the Coastal Plain is protecting our identity and our human rights. It is our fundamental human right to continue to feed our families on our ancestral lands and practice our traditional way of life. For us, this is a matter of physical, spiritual, and cultural survival.

For me, this issue has also brought me back to my identity and my heritage. While I am from Fort Yukon, and spent many summers in Venetie, I lost my way as a teenager and young woman. I moved spiritually and culturally away from my people and what was important. Only when I began to work at the Gwich'in Steering Committee, did I return to my rightful place. I remember one trip to Arctic Village I went up to a mountain called Duchanlee. I felt so

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<sup>1</sup> See Attachment 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Attachment 2.

overwhelmed, I just started crying. I don't know why. I asked Creator for forgiveness and said that I am here now to share in my responsibility as a Gwich'in.

I don't choose to travel thousands of miles each year and spend time away from my family; I was forced into a corner. I am forced to advocate for protecting the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. I do this work for my children and my grandchildren; it is their birthright to have caribou. I do this work because it is my responsibility as a Gwich'in; our pact with the Porcupine Caribou requires me to take care of them as they have taken care of us.

We have occupied these areas for thousands and thousands of years, and we will be the first to be impacted if oil and gas activities occur. Our elders are our scientists. They have hunted and lived off the land far longer than any western researcher. Our science and our traditional knowledge tells us that oil and gas leasing, exploration, and development will damage the calving grounds. It will impact the quality, health, and availability of our traditional resources, like caribou and birds. We know that oil and gas activities will also impact the air, water, and lands. We have watched as other areas on the North Slope dramatically changed because of industrial development. These changes continue to become more widespread and intense with every passing year, as development expands. Places that used to support indigenous communities and ways of life no longer do. Animals are showing signs of sickness, and are not following their traditional migratory paths. We are seeing great changes in our land and animals as a result of climate change, which is impacting Alaska more intensely than the lower-48.

We must protect the Coastal Plain to protect our food security. "Gwich'in" means "people of the land." We are real people. We have jobs, families and children. We live off the land. We eat moose, fish, birds, berries, medicines, and of course, caribou. Western food is very expensive in our villages and it is not healthy for us to eat. When we do not have our traditional foods, our people get sick. When we cannot share foods within communities and between our communities, our culture suffers. When we cannot practice our traditional ways, our youth cannot learn their heritage.

People have said that you can have development on the Coastal Plain and take care of the plants and animals. People have said that you can have development on the Coastal Plain and the caribou will not be impacted, that they will even like the pipelines and roads. People tell us that the technology is so good now that there will be no harm to land, air, and water. But as Gwich'in, we know that is not true. And it is not a risk we can afford to take. Because if you take that risk and are wrong, we are what is lost — the Gwich'in people.

I am here today because our congressional delegation has not listened to us or respected our human rights. The Coastal Plain is not just a piece of land with oil underneath. It is the heart of our people, our food, and our way of life. Our very survival depends on its protection. Our children, our future generations, deserve to see the world the way it was in the beginning, not just when we are done with it.

I am here today because the process that the Bureau of Land Management is taking to hold a lease sale this year is trampling our human rights. The agency is not respecting our knowledge, is not responding to our requests, and is not meeting its obligations under the law.

Instead, the agency is rushing to lease the calving grounds without regard to the risk it poses to us and our villages.

I want to publicly state that the Native corporations do not speak for us. They are the ones who will benefit from development while the tribes live with the aftermath. Our elders taught us to respect and honor our lands. They did not encourage us to fight each other for oil and gas development; that is just self greed.

We are not asking for anything more than the ability to hold on to our identity; to be able to practice our way of life, which has sustained us since time immemorial; to be able to pass our traditions on to our children and to their children; and to continue to live and thrive in our homelands. That is what is at stake for the Gwich'in people.

That is why the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act is so important. As our elder Jonathon Solomon said *"It is our belief that the future of the Gwich'in and the future of the Caribou are the same. Harm to the Porcupine Caribou Herd is harm to the Gwich'in culture and millennia-old way of life."*

We thank the millions of Americans who stand with us in support of protecting the Coastal Plain. We thank the more than 200 Alaska Native and Tribal organizations and the many Native American Tribes who have resolutions supporting the Gwich'in. We thank every member of Congress who is standing in solidarity with the Gwich'in Nation by co-sponsoring the bill.

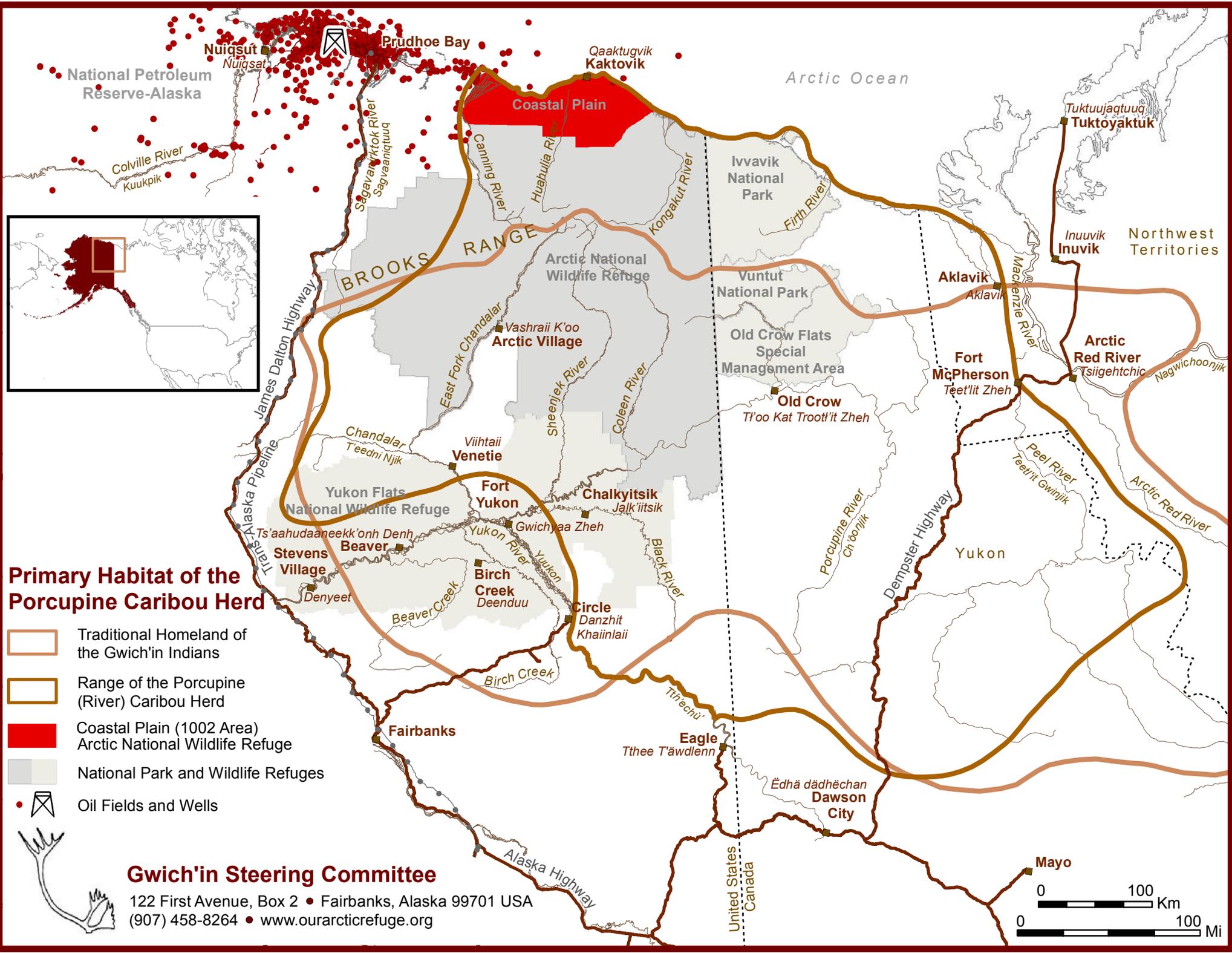
I ask that you quickly pass this legislation to protect our human rights and our way of life.

Mahsi'choo for the opportunity to address you today.

Attachment 1: Primary Habitat of the Porcupine Caribou Herd Map.

Attachment 2: Gwich'in Niintsyaa 2018, Resolution to Protect the Birthplace and Nursery Grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd (June 26, 2018).

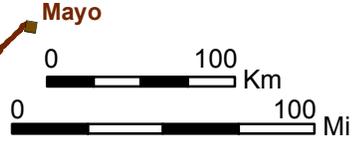
Additional Materials: *A Moral Choice for the United States: The Human Rights Implications for the Gwich'in of Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* (2005), available at <http://ourarcticrefuge.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/GSChumanrightsreport.pdf>.



## Primary Habitat of the Porcupine Caribou Herd

-  Traditional Homeland of the Gwich'in Indians
-  Range of the Porcupine (River) Caribou Herd
-  Coastal Plain (1002 Area) Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
-  National Park and Wildlife Refuges
-  Oil Fields and Wells

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# Gwich'in Niintsyaa 2018

## *Resolution to Protect the Birthplace and Nursery Grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd*

### WHEREAS:

For thousands of years, the Gwich'in people of northeast Alaska and northwest Canada, have relied on caribou for food, clothing, shelter, tools and life itself, and today the Porcupine Caribou Herd remains essential to meet the nutritional, cultural and spiritual needs of our People; and

### WHEREAS:

The Gwich'in have the inherent right to continue our own way of life; and that this right is recognized and affirmed by civilized nations in the international covenants on human rights. Article 1 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, ratified by the U.S. Senate, reads in part:

*"...In no case may a people be deprived of their own means of subsistence";* and

### WHEREAS:

The health and productivity of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and their availability to Gwich'in communities, and the very future of our People is endangered by proposed oil and gas exploration and development in the calving and post-calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; and

### WHEREAS:

The entire Gwich'in Nation was called together by our Chiefs in Arctic Village June 5-10, 1988 to carefully address this issue and to seek the advice of our elders; and

### WHEREAS:

The Gwich'in people of every community from Arctic Village, Venetie, Fort Yukon, Beaver, Chalkyitsik, Birch Creek, Stevens Village, Circle, and Eagle Village in Alaska; from Old Crow, Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik, and Inuvik in Canada have reached consensus in their traditional way, and now speak with a single voice; and

### WHEREAS:

The Gwich'in people and Chiefs of our communities have met biennially since 1988 to re-affirm this position guided by the wisdom of our elders; and met again in 2018 in Tsiigehtchic, Northwest Territories, Canada, now re-affirm our position.

### NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That the United States President and Congress recognize the rights of the Gwich'in people to continue to live our way of life by prohibiting exploration and development in the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd; and

### BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge be made Wilderness to protect the sacred birthplace of the caribou.

Passed unanimously on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2018 in Tsiigehtchic, Northwest Territories, Canada.