

**Written Statement of
Bernadette Demientieff
Executive Director, Gwich'in Steering Committee
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources**

Hearing on:

H.R. 6285 “Alaska’s Right to Produce Act of 2023”

November 29th 2023

My name is Bernadette Demientieff, I am the Executive Director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, an organization founded in 1988, by the Elders and Chiefs of the Gwich'in Nation. I work tirelessly to protect the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the Gwich'in way of life. This work is very personal to me: it is about our cultural and spiritual connection that we have with our land, water, and animals. It is about our children and our future generations. I have 5 children and 7 beautiful grandchildren who deserve the assurance from the US government that our culture, traditions, and connections to our sacred land and its animals will not be infringed on. They deserve to live and thrive off the land that the Creator blessed us with.

The Gwich'in Nation has been unified in our voice against oil development in the sacred lands of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for decades – in 1988 we signed a formal resolution, the Gwich'in Niintsyaa, to protect the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. Our Elders recognized that oil development in caribou calving grounds was a threat to the very heart of our people. Since that time, as a people we have presented testimony in front of the US Congress, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, and public hearings to protect our sacred lands and use our voices not just for ourselves but for the caribou.

That is why when the Biden administration canceled the last remaining lease in the Arctic Refuge, the Gwich'in people had tears of joy and relief. We understand that there is a lot of work that still needs to happen but with the weight of uncertainty lifted around imminent development, if only for a while, we received a reprieve from the single-minded pursuit of profit at the expense of nature and our culture. We have celebrated the administration's actions and a temporary break from the relentless threat to the Porcupine Caribou Herd and the Gwich'in way of life.

The Gwich'in and other Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of the Arctic for millennia. The push to sell our sacred lands for corporate profit disregards this legacy of stewardship. The Biden administration's decision to cancel oil and gas leases in the Arctic Refuge was a crucial first step, but legislation like this bill that seeks to undo those actions make it clear that we must continue to fight for permanent protections for the Arctic Refuge. It is also no secret that our

homelands are warming at four times the rate of the rest of the planet, and the Gwich'in people are among the first to feel its effects. Our once-fertile lands are eroding into the ocean. Warming waters threaten our fish, and the arrival of ticks, a previously unknown phenomenon, underscores the profound changes we face. Oil and gas development would only exacerbate the effects of climate change in the Arctic and the world over.

We extend our gratitude to President Biden, Secretary Haaland, and the federal and state legislators who have stood by us. We also acknowledge the American public, the majority of which stand with the Gwich'in to protect this sacred land. Dozens of banks and insurance companies have now committed to not underwrite oil and gas development in the Arctic. The international community has repeatedly called on the United States to address our concerns. These show pathways towards permanent protection. I, along with the Gwich'in Nation, will continue to protect the Porcupine Caribou Herd, the Gwich'in Way Of Life and the Sacred Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for our future generations. And the generations to come.

Mahsi Choo
Bernadette Demientieff