

**Written Statement of
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Former Mayor, City of Nuiqsut
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”

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My name is Rosemary Ahtuanguak. I am Iñupiaq, former mayor of Nuiqsut, health aide, community leader, and grandmother. I am the Executive Director of Grandmothers Growing Goodness. We are dedicated to elevating the understanding and protection of Iñupiat culture and people in the face of rampant oil and gas development and climate change. Our core purpose is to educate locals and non-locals about Arctic issues, provide mentoring for the next generation of North Slope leaders, and influence local, state, and federal policy to protect the health, culture, and wellbeing of North Slope communities.

The Iñupiat have inhabited the region now known as the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, for thousands of years. Today, the Western Arctic provides food for more than 40 communities. Six communities – Anaktuvuk Pass, Atkasuk, Nuiqsut, Point Lay, Utqiagvik, and Wainwright – harvest all or nearly all of their subsistence resources from the Reserve.

In Nuiqsut, over 70% of our households rely on subsistence resources for more than half of our diet. And we face severe food insecurity. A third of households are unable to get enough healthy food to meet their needs, half of households are unable to get enough subsistence foods, and a quarter of our households have reported that at times they do not have enough food to eat. Recently, we were threatened with a proposal by the Alaska State government to limit our hunt of caribou to only five per year. This would lead to starvation in my community - maintaining our ability to hunt is key to our survival.

But subsistence is not only about the number of harvested animals and total number of pounds of meat produced. It involves our cultural identity, the sharing of traditional knowledge and values, time together on the land, and the sharing of food within our own community as well as with other villages.

Nuiqsut is at ground zero for the industrialization of the Arctic. The people in my village have experienced serious mental and physical health impacts from industrial development. We are experiencing dramatic changes to our land and waters, from development and from climate change.

Flaring is a serious concern, and it happens far more than it is supposed to. This is a significant source of various contaminants that are linked to lung disease and lung cancer. Studies show that residents near flares suffer from a statistically significant increase in preterm births. Flaring can cause and exacerbate asthma, a problem which our community is seriously burdened by. As a health aide in Nuiqsut from 1986-2000, I saw the number of asthma cases in our village go from 1 to 75. Now, industry proposes venting gas which is much worse.

The risk of accidents is also a constant concern. On March 4, 2022, ConocoPhillips had a gas blowout at its Alpine CD1 pad, only a few miles from our village. Despite evacuating its own employees, ConocoPhillips insisted that no one in our village was at risk. This did not make much sense to my people, and around 20 families fled the village in fear for their health and safety. Many had experienced lasting impacts from the Repsol blowout a decade earlier and did not want to go through a similar experience again.

Impacts to subsistence, pollution, and emergencies – these are all reasons why we must have stronger regulations for oil and gas development.

The power and influence of oil and gas companies on the North Slope make it difficult to achieve better protections for our people, but our City and Tribal governments have worked hard to advocate for better regulation of this activity. It is not easy standing up to the oil companies. But it has to be done. Nuiqsut has long asked for mitigation measures that could better protect our air quality and for stronger measures to protect our subsistence use of the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd.

The proposed regulations for the Reserve will not solve all the problems we face from oil and gas development, but there are many provisions that are an improvement. The regulations require consultation with Tribes and the prioritization of subsistence uses. They require consideration of Indigenous Knowledge and open the door for opportunities for co-stewardship. And the process to create new Special Areas could be used to create a Nuiqsut subsistence use Special Area.

My organization appreciates the efforts the Bureau of Land Management has gone through to recognize the importance of subsistence in these regulations. We look forward to continuing to support the agency's efforts to ensure that our life, health, safety, culture, and traditions are protected.

The government has an obligation to protect our community from the harms of the oil industry and must stop expecting us to sacrifice our own lives “in the national interest.” Our communities have been asked to do so for too long, and environmental justice requires a new approach.