

Adam Kolton Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
Regarding FY 2020 Funding related to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
February 26, 2019

Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for having me. My name is Adam Kolton and I am the Executive Director of Alaska Wilderness League, the only national organization that is devoted exclusively to the conservation of Alaska's treasured landscapes. With more than 100,000 members and supporters across the country, Alaska Wilderness League exists to help give a voice to those who care about Alaska's public lands and waters, which we collectively own and for which the federal agencies are entrusted to manage for the collective benefit of all Americans.

Unlike most other witnesses before you, I am here today not to ask for money. Just the opposite. I am here because it is vital that this committee help put the brakes on the reckless manner in which the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) is seeking to auction off the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain to oil and gas companies as early as this summer.

We simply can't allow this to happen. What's at stake is not just the fate of America's largest and wildest refuge or the cultures of the indigenous peoples who depend on it for their subsistence and way of life but our ability to keep our promises to future generations. If we allow this oil and gas leasing to go forward – in an area that had been protected for more than half a century – then what National Park, Wildlife Refuge or cherished coastline is truly safe?

So how did we get here? As you know, as part of the Tax Cut and Job's Act proponents of drilling used the budget reconciliation process in the Senate to rollback protections for the Arctic Refuge, including a projected \$2.2 billion dollars as the only offset for the \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts. So without a full, fair and open debate and without any hearings or separate votes in the House, the Arctic Refuge was put on the auction block, with two mandated lease sales of 400,000 acres apiece on the coastal plain within ten years.

There are many reasons why this drilling gambit is immoral and wrong-headed. It would put at risk a national treasure and threaten hundreds of species of wildlife including 200,000 caribou that undertake one of the longest land migrations on the planet to give birth to their calves on the coastal plain. Drilling would threaten denning polar bears, rare musk oxen and millions of migratory birds that travel to or through every state and five continents.

If oil is discovered, according to the Energy Information Administration, much of it is likely to be exported to Asia markets. The first drop of oil might flow more than a decade from now with speculative peak production decades after that, at the very time when our national urgently needs to be transitioning away from fossil fuels, especially oil from these extreme frontier areas.

But putting aside the arguments against drilling and recognizing that the Tax Act is now law, the way the Department of Interior is advancing this scheme should alarm even those in Congress who support development the Arctic Refuge. Consider this:

- The Trump Administration testified before Congress that leasing would be a 4-5 year process and the Tax Act itself stipulated 4 years. Yet the Interior Department is seeking to do this in half the time, motivated solely by having a lease sale before any potential political shifts. The senior Senator from Alaska, one of the leading drilling proponents, candidly acknowledged this recently by stating that “there is a strong commitment [from the Trump administration] to work with us to get these leases out before the end of this term ... because once you get those leases out into the hands of those who can then move forward, it’s tougher to throw the roadblocks in place.”
- The Administration now seems completely uninterested in seeking to generate anything close to the kind of revenues that were promised as Tax Act offsets. Indeed, for BLM to generate the projected revenue promised in the Tax Cuts Act - assuming it offered and received bids on 800,000 acres from both lease sales - the agency would have to set the minimum bids at \$2,750 per acre. This is more than one hundred times the average lease bid on Alaska’s North Slope. With no promises from BLM that they will set minimum bids for leases, there is little likelihood that the American taxpayer will see more than a fraction of this fiscal promise.
- There has been woefully inadequate consultation with the Gwich’in people whose subsistence culture is at risk from drilling. The Gwich’in of Alaska and Canada are culturally and spiritually connected to the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which in turn relies on the Coastal Plain for calving and post-calving habitat. Because of this connection, the Gwich’in consider the Coastal Plain to be sacred and believe that protecting the Coastal Plain is vital to their human rights and food security. Despite acknowledging that oil and gas can have impacts on caribou, BLM concludes that there will not be an impact on the subsistence resources for the Gwich’in. This ignores the traditional knowledge and human rights of the Gwich’in. And perhaps most troubling, the agency has denied the Gwich’in their rights, under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of holding special subsistence hearings in Gwich’in communities.

The American people were promised a robust, scientifically sound review process with public comment and full tribal consultation. But actions speak louder than words and from the beginning, the Administration has set out to rush this process, depriving federal and climate scientists, the Gwich’in people, and the American public the opportunity to meaningfully contribute. The administration has repeatedly cut corners at every step of the way by placing arbitrary deadlines and limitations on the environmental review in order to achieve its aggressive and politically motivated timelines—disregarding the serious biological, cultural and climate impacts fossil fuel extraction will have in the rapidly-warming Arctic.

We are currently in an open comment period for a Draft ‘Environmental Impact Statement,’ for leasing on the Refuge’s coastal plain. Trump administration officials are barreling ahead with plans for the 2019 lease sale while electing not to gather any new data about the Arctic Refuge

that could inform a decision on drilling location. Instead, the DEIS is based solely on existing data regardless of how incomplete it may be. The current comment period began on the eve of the busy holiday season for most Americans and has been conducted in large part during the government shutdown. The process has allowed for limited public meetings – all announced with little notice and opportunity to comment. For example, Fairbanks, Alaska was given only four days notice ahead of the scheduled public meeting, two of those days over the weekend. Furthermore, only one meeting was held for individuals outside of Alaska to testify in person regarding one of our nation’s most iconic public lands. Despite this, the vast majority of testimony throughout this process has been in opposition to development.

At the same time, for nearly six months BLM has been giving mixed, confusing and conflicting statements about whether they plan to allow seismic exploration permit approvals for the coastal plain – as early as this winter. Seismic exploration is highly destructive to lands and wildlife. The coastal plain still bears scars of 2-D seismic testing conducted more than 30 years ago. Modern seismic methods cut an even denser grid of trails.

From what little we know about the proposed plans for seismic, convoys of 90,000 lb. thumper trucks, tractors and bulldozers would roll over extensive areas of fragile tundra 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months, and two 160-person worker “camps” with extensive amenities would be dragged across the landscape. More than three-quarters of the coastal plain has been designated as critical habitat for polar bears, who are increasingly using the area to build their dens as sea ice disappears due to climate change. As the seismic trucks proceed, they’ll stop and ‘thump’ the ground, using vibrations to look for oil which will cause significant disturbance, possible fatalities, to an already stressed polar bear population and to other species. And yet, BLM seems intent on pushing forward with a plan for seismic exploration that would likely frighten mother bears into fleeing from their dens, leaving cubs behind to perish. These intrusive activities could go on for years throughout the life of an oil field and would cause severe and long-lasting damage to the Arctic Refuge.

Bottom line, the Administration’s rush to sell-off the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge must be halted. For decades, Americans from all walks of life have stood together to protect the Refuge. Today the idea of drilling in this iconic landscape remains deeply unpopular with the American people who do not want, did not ask for, and will not accept that the wildest place in our country is on track to be sacrificed.

In February 2019, Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) introduced H.R. 1146, the “Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act” with over one hundred original cosponsors, including all the majority members of this subcommittee. This legislation would repeal the 2017 provision that mandates oil and gas development on the pristine coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We hope to work with Congressional champions and leadership to see this legislation passed into law.

But the most urgent challenge today is to halt this mad rush to hold a lease sale. It is not being done in accordance with the law, with the promises made in the Tax Act or in the national interest. We

respectfully request that BLM be prohibited from using any funds for purposes of holding an oil and gas lease sale the Coastal Plains of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in FY2020.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.