

**Adam Kolton Public Witness Testimony**  
**Alaska Wilderness League**  
**Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee**  
**Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Regarding FY 2021 Funding related to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**  
**January 29, 2020**

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 benefit of all Americans. This testimony will address funding needs related to the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) budget and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) budget.

I'm here today because we urgently need your help to ensure that the administration follows the law, honors congressional intent and protects the vital interests of taxpayers when it comes to two of our national treasures in Alaska that are at grave risk, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Tongass National Forest.

**Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**

As we speak, the Trump administration is putting the finishing touches on a rushed plan to hold the first ever oil and gas lease in the Arctic Refuge. To date, we have seen an environmental review process that sidesteps environmental laws, sidelines scientists and skips required consultation with indigenous people. This process jeopardizes the very values for which this area was set aside to protect, endangering not only iconic wildlife such as the threatened Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population, but the way of life for the Gwich'in people and their 15 villages. Beyond that, and perhaps most notable for the members of this subcommittee, the Interior Department has also completely abandoned its commitment and the legislative requirement of the 2017 Tax Act that Arctic Refuge lease sales generate \$2.2 billion dollars in revenue, half of which going to the federal treasury. This was literally the only offset for more than \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts contained in that legislation.

Thank you, Madame Chair, and members of the subcommittee for addressing this important concern in the FY2020 Interior and Environment Appropriations bill by simply requiring the Bureau of Land Management to set minimum lease sale bids sufficient to meet its promised and statutory revenue obligations (Section 118). While this language was retained by the House in a strong bipartisan fashion it was regrettably not included in the final bill.

As a result, the BLM could, in the coming months, hold a lease sale that auctions off this cherished landscape at fire sale prices, blowing an even larger hole in the deficit and setting up a

future scenario in which even more precious taxpayer resources may be needed to buy back leases from oil companies that will bid low and attempt to sell back high.

Of course, this can still be avoided if the agency fulfills its responsibility to set minimum lease sale bids tied to the enacted revenue targets in the Tax Act. What would those bids need to be set at? According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, an independent, nonpartisan voice working to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly and that government operates within its means, for the BLM to generate the projected revenue, assuming it offers and receives bids on 800,000 acres from two lease sales, oil company bids would need to average \$2,250 per acre. This is one hundred times the average bid per acre for Alaska's North Slope on the thousands of square miles adjacent to the coastal plain. Arctic Refuge drilling proponents, who have long argued about the enormous oil potential of this area and its "deficit reducing" potential, now seem to be running fast and furious from these audacious claims.

Even Congressman Don Young, speaking on the floor during the debate on HR 3055, suggested that "the first sale may not make [the revenue target]." Senator Lisa Murkowski, the driving force pushing for Arctic Refuge development in the Senate, referred to minimum lease sale bids as "something that's designed to kill exploration in ANWR" to E&E News, signaling clearly that revenue promises made during the tax bill process were never serious.<sup>1</sup>

Why are some fearful and opposed to language that simply enforces what Congress already passed in 2017? Perhaps they're concerned about the implications of BP's Alaska asset sell-off and what it says about broad oil industry interest. Maybe they're worried that more than \$2.5 trillion worth of investors and more than a dozen major national and international banks including Goldman Sachs have signaled an unwillingness to finance Arctic Refuge oil and gas development. Or perhaps they never really believed nor cared if this would be the kind of oil revenue bonanza that they've been touting all these years. What appears to matter more is simply to hold a lease sale whatever the cost, or in this case, the taxpayer rip-off may be.

Indeed, Alaska's senior Senator Lisa Murkowski, in a moment of candor, acknowledged that, "They [officials within the Trump Interior Department] are working fairly and aggressively to put in place, to lay the groundwork for what comes next ... 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."

In light of this, it may not be surprising that the administration is barreling toward a lease sale in ways that not only disregard the fiscal consequences but also the impact to the resources on the ground. Take for example the issue of the Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population. Climate change and disappearing sea ice is causing these bears to come onshore more frequently in search food and to build their winter maternity dens. Scientists warn that proposed seismic exploration in the Arctic Refuge—with its convoys of 90,000 pound trucks, tractors and bulldozers that would roll over extensive areas of fragile tundra 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months, and two 160-person worker "camps" that would be dragged across the landscape—poses an unacceptable risk to these denning bears and their cubs. Yet the Interior Department has

developed no credible plan or meaningful restrictions on seismic exploration to prevent killing polar bears.

Of course, Arctic Refuge drilling is not just bad news for bears. The Interior Department has also glossed over potential impacts to the awe-inspiring Porcupine caribou herd, even as new science was released last month documenting how existing North Slope oil development has displaced caribou from preferred calving areas.

If similar displacement occurs in the Arctic Refuge, the consequences could be catastrophic for the 8,000 Gwich'in Athabaskan people of Alaska and Canada who have depended on the caribou for thousands of generations. The Gwich'in have been unified in their opposition to drilling and fully expected the Interior Department to consult with them as required in by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. That request was denied.

If all that weren't troubling enough, Politico reported that the administration has silenced scientists and pressured others in pursuit of advancing leasing as quickly as possible:

*“According to interviews with more than a dozen current and former employees at the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska, that speed has come at a significant cost to the reliability and comprehensiveness of the overall environmental review.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Furthermore, leaked documents have shown that the work of career scientists has been altered or disregarded to underplay the potential impact of oil and gas development on the coastal plain.

Given the reckless manner at which the Interior Department is seeking to hand over this national treasure to oil companies and its disregard for the requirements of the Tax Act, including its own revenue assumptions, we ask you to again include language in the underlying bill that forces the administration to meet its promises and legal responsibilities.

### **Tongass National Forest**

We similarly ask for the subcommittee's help to rein in the administration as it seeks to exempt the entire 17 million-acre Tongass National Forest from the federal Roadless Rule. The Forest Service had originally been considering options to modify the Roadless Rule as it applies to “America's Rainforest,” but President Trump specifically directed the agency—over its objection—to exempt every single area from this nearly 20-year-old, widely supported and successful policy.

As a result, an already costly, money-losing timber program in the Tongass could fleece taxpayers even more. Alaska Wilderness League, joined by many other businesses and organizations, strongly supported Representative Earl Blumenauer's (D-OR) successful amendment (#136) to last year's bill to end taxpayer subsidies for roadbuilding activity in the Tongass National Forest. Even now, the Forest Service's Tongass timber program costs taxpayers approximately \$30 million per year for a loss of approximately \$600 million over the last 20 years—incredible, especially when you consider that the Forest Service desperately needs that money for its \$68 million maintenance backlog on national forest roads in Alaska.

The good news is that the economy of Southeast Alaska has become less reliant on industrial scale old-growth clearcutting and instead depends increasingly on commercial fishing, tourism and other aspects of the outdoor recreation economy—businesses that depend on a healthy forest. Additionally, according to a Center for American Progress analysis:

*“Any climate change solution will require healthy natural carbon sinks, especially in places such as the Tongass where forests are especially good at capturing carbon...Removal of roadless protections [Tongass National Forest] threatens a carbon sink that already stores more than 400 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent and sequesters an additional 3 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually, equivalent to taking more than 637,000 cars off the road each year.”<sup>iii</sup>*

It makes no sense to turn back the clock and have the federal government continue to subsidize the destruction of 800-year-old trees in ways that exacerbate climate change, threaten Alaska’s outdoor economy, and imperil fish and wildlife.

We urge the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee to include the Blumenauer language, which passed the House with a bipartisan vote of 243-188, in this year’s underlying bill. Doing so would protect U.S. taxpayers, Southeast Alaska’s vibrant outdoor economy, hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation interests, as well as wildlife and our climate.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and share the views on behalf of our members and supporters.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.eenews.net/eedaily/stories/1060381265/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/trump-science-alaska-drilling-rush/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2019/11/20/477495/trumps-energy-policies-put-alaska-climate-crosshairs/>