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[EXTERNAL] Comment

1 message

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To: blm_ak_coastalplain_EIS@blm.gov

At the May 29 scoping meeting in Fairbanks, AK, local UAF anthropology Ph.D. candidate Odin Miller, noted the need for the coastal plain EIS to recognize Alaska Statute 16.05.094. According to this law, the Alaska Fish and Wildlife Division of Subsistence must gather and share information on the details of state residents' subsistence needs. These are to include evaluation of "the impact of state and federal laws and regulations on subsistence hunting and fishing, and when corrective action is indicated, make recommendations to the department." These recommendations may include "amendment and appeal of regulations affecting subsistence hunting and fishing." This seems to resonate, as well, with ANCILA's purposes. According to the 1980 Act, oil and gas activities may proceed only IF they "avoid significant adverse affects on fish and wildlife" and "provide the opportunity for rural residents engaged in a subsistence way of life to continue to do so." Miller also noted that there are no data on the role of subsistence caribou hunting for the Gwich'in People in Alaska's Fish and Wildlife Division of Subsistence files. He recommended a minimum of three years of Porcupine Caribou Herd studies in relation to the needs of all villages dependent upon them.

I would like to add a call to respect the Gwich'in People's knowledge of their own needs and knowledge about the needs of the Porcupine Caribou Herd accumulated across thousands of years of interdependence. They knowingly insist that oil and gas drilling can not co-exist with their subsistence (as well as other spiritual and cultural needs). As Bernadette Demientieff, director of The Gwich'in Steering Committee, stresses, "My elders are my scientists. They have been living in this area a lot longer than any body else. And, when they say this [oil and gas activities] is the wrong thing to do, when they say that our way of life is at risk, I'm gonna take their word before anybody else's. They know our animals."

On May 29 we heard testimony after testimony of Gwich'in people and other Alaska Native neighbors to this effect, adamantly opposing oil and gas activities in the coastal plain. For example, Steve Ginnis, Gwich'yaa Zhee Traditional Chief from Fort Yukon, Alaska, stressed the unwillingness to "be outsourcing resources on our land [as indeed, Alaskan lands have never been ceded by sovereign tribes to Russia nor the U.S.]," which are for "future generations...We are," he said, "talking about our people's long-time survival. I am very concerned about what's going to happen."

Dr. Jessica Black, a Gwich'in professor in the Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development at UAF stressed the interdependence of coastal plain, caribou, Gwich'in culture, and intergenerational health. She left us with a vision of Gwich'in children running free mirroring caribou babies freely running in their birthing grounds.

Writer, actor, film director, and former Executive Director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, Princess Daazhrai Johnson of Fairbanks, also stressed how little sense it makes to drill in birthing grounds. She left us with an audible impression—the Porcupine Herd's cows insisting, "Do not drill where I am having my calves."

Mr. Jeffrey Johns, an elder of Venetie, speaking his first language Gwich'in and then English, pled for the caribou babies. They must have the peace of the coastal plain to "grow bigger and stronger." From there the maturing calves travel to Arctic Village, to Venetie, to other villages. Gwich'in villages are where they are—across the far more recent U.S.-Canada border—because of the Porcupine Herd's traditional patterns, generation after generation of flows. "Please do not disturb them."

Ed Alexander, Gwich'yaa Gwich'in from Fort Yukon and co-chair of Gwich'in Council International, who "unilaterally condemn oil and lease sales," emphasized there is no place else on the continent of North America or anywhere like the coastal plain. It is world-renowned, unique in itself. It is, he warned, "un-ethical not to heed Gwich'in" in a "rushed process that may destroy our ways of life." It also goes against state and federal agreements and mandates.

This scoping process, then, must take into account the purposes, intents, and requirements of Alaskan and Federal laws regarding subsistence as mentioned above. This includes gathering and sharing related data, which has not yet been done. In doing so, however, the Gwich'in People and other Alaska Natives must not be treated merely as subjects of research, but as scientists themselves. The Gwich'in Nation and other Alaska Native Peoples know the Arctic, the coastal plain, the caribou, their own cultures, and their interdependent needs, obviously, far longer and far more intimately than anyone else. Required information on subsistence and coastal plain caribou must be gathered according to principles, for example, as explained in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's blockbuster work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. And, ultimately, oil and gas drilling may not go forward while cutting off subsistence interdependencies with the coastal plain.