



CoastalPlain_EIS, BLM_AK <blm_ak_coastalplain_eis@blm.gov>

[EXTERNAL] Debbie S. Miller: Scoping Comments: Coastal Plain EIS

1 message

Debbie S. Miller <debbiesmiller2@gmail.com>

Sun, Jun 10, 2018 at 6:16 PM

To: "CoastalPlain_EIS, Blm_Ak" <blm_ak_coastalplain_eis@blm.gov>, Iellis@blm.gov, arctic_refuge@fws.gov

Dear BLM and USFWS Directors,

Attached are my scoping comments relating to the proposed oil and gas leasing program on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Please email me if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,

Debbie S. Miller

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A Wild Promise: Prince William Sound (Braided River, April, 2018)

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2 attachments**BLM Scoping Comments Arctic Refuge.docx**

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June 11, 2018

TO: Secretary Ryan Zinke

Bureau of Land Management Director, Brian Steed

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director, Greg Sheehan

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Manager, Steve Berendzen

Alaska Regional Director of U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Greg Siekaniec

FR: Debbie S. Miller

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RE: Scoping Comments for a possible oil and gas leasing program on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Dear Secretary Zinke and Directors,

As a 43-year Alaskan, I've extensively explored and written many books about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Arctic as a region. In the 1970s, I was a school teacher in Arctic Village, the traditional Gwich'in community that is strongly opposed to oil development on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. In 1988, the Gwich'in elders voiced their concern and gave a strong directive in opposition to industrial activity on the calving and nursery ground of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, a herd that has sustained the Gwich'in people of Alaska and Canada for thousands of years. A sensitive birthplace, their name for the coastal plain is *lizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit*, "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

It was an honor to live in Arctic Village and see the profound connection that the Gwich'in have with the caribou and their homeland.

I've hiked and paddled more than 1,000 miles in the Arctic Refuge, and climbed to the summit of Mt. Michelson in the Brooks Range which offers a spectacular view of the entire 1002 coastal plain and the Beaufort Sea. It's amazing to think that this one narrow and beautiful stretch of coastal plain, rich with wildlife, has been the only part of Alaska's vast North Slope closed to oil and gas development. This band of rolling tundra represents a mere 5% of the Arctic's coastal region that has been off limits to industry. The other 95% of the North Slope has been turned into a checkerboard of oil and gas lease sale areas. Now, because of an ill-construed rider on the 2017 Tax Bill, nearly 100% of the North Slope, both federal and state lands, has been reserved for industry --- about 45 million acres, a sweeping area the size of North Dakota.

Most Americans believe in balanced resource development and protecting our wildlife refuges. Alaska's Arctic is off kilter. There is no balance. It's all about money and carving up more tracts of land for the oil industry, even in our largest and wildest refuge. Even in the face of climate change and threatened species. Turning the Arctic Refuge into an oil field with a maze of pipelines and drilling pads, and all the impacts from industrial activity, is not acceptable to the vast majority of Americans. Such development violates the original purposes of the Arctic Refuge, international wildlife agreements, the Endangered Species Act, the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act, and such development violates the human rights of the Gwich'in people of Alaska and Canada.

It's most unfortunate that you've been charged with implementing this Tax Bill rider that should be repealed, but at the same time you must do the very best job evaluating the environmental impacts from coastal plain leasing and development as governed by the National Environmental Policy Act and other national environmental laws. I urge you to create a broad set of fair and reasonable alternatives for any possible oil leasing program, including any geophysical and geological surveys, all seismic operations, oil exploration, development, production, pipelines, roads and other transportation and access that reflects the input and recommendations you will receive from the public. Please do a thorough environmental analysis and look carefully at the consequences and cumulative impacts to the land, water, wildlife and people that would result from turning the biological heart of our greatest wildlife refuge into an oil field complex and industrial zone.

To develop a full set of leasing alternatives for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), I understand that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the managing authority for the Arctic Refuge. In the 1980s, the USFWS, in cooperation with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducted a five-year baseline study and assessment of the Arctic Refuge coastal plain, evaluating its biological, wilderness, oil and gas resource values and impacts from possible development. This 1987 assessment involved 60 staff years of research and 57 field studies, yet there were still gaps such as the lack of an analysis on the cumulative impacts from development and impacts that relate to global warming and climate change.

That massive report found that the most biologically productive part of the Arctic Refuge, the center for wildlife activity, is the coastal plain in the 1002 area. In addition to the 1002 area being the birthplace and nursery ground for our second largest caribou herd, the Porcupine Herd, it is also home to more than 135 migratory, breeding and resident bird species, and hosts the largest concentration of land-denning polar bears in America. The coastal plain offers "critical habitat" for polar bears.

Since the 1987 Coastal Plain Resource Assessment EIS was released, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has grown more valuable and important to wildlife as a sanctuary, and there are greater threats to wildlife that must be carefully evaluated. These are some of the significant changes that have occurred over the past three decades:

- 1) Polar bears are now a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act and critical habitat has been designated throughout most of the 1002 area. The Beaufort Sea population dropped by 40% between the years of 2001 to 2010 due to loss of sea ice and low prey abundance related to climate change (Ecological Society of America, April, 2015). With unstable sea ice conditions, the Arctic Refuge coastal plain is more valuable and necessary for onshore denning habitat. Under the **1976 International Polar Bear Agreement, Article II requires countries to protect ecosystems where polar bears live, especially denning and feeding sites.** The United States should abide by Article II of this agreement and close the 1002 area to oil and gas leasing to protect polar bear denning habitat and prevent disturbance to the bears. **If the U.S. industrializes the Arctic's most significant polar bear denning habitat in America, our country is in violation of this multilateral treaty signed in Oslo, on Nov. 15, 1973.**
- 2) The US-Canada International Agreement for the Conservation of Porcupine Caribou Herd Agreement was ratified in July, 1987. **This agreement was signed by the United States and Canada, and requires that parties take appropriate action to conserve the Porcupine Caribou Herd and its habitat and to ensure opportunities for customary and traditional uses of the herd in Alaska and Canada.** Oil development on the birthplace and nursery ground of the Porcupine Herd poses a serious threat to the herd and subsistence opportunities for residents of Alaska and Canada. Proposed industrialization of the coastal plain would very likely be in violation of this international agreement. **The Porcupine Management and International boards of governance need to be consulted about any proposed oil leasing program on the coastal plain, including seismic, exploration, development, infrastructure, and transportation activities.**
- 3) **A number of bird species that breed on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge have declining populations, are threatened, or near threatened.** The Spectacled Eider has been a threatened species since 1993. Yellow-billed loons and buff-breasted sandpipers are near threatened. Shorebirds such as the American golden plover, dunlin, red-necked phalarope, western sandpiper and arctic tern have populations in decline due to habitat loss and contamination issues in their winter range. The least we can do is protect the breeding grounds for these long-distance migrants, birds that have flown tens of thousands of miles across the globe. The concept of a wildlife refuge is to protect species so they have a healthy, clean, non-industrialized home, so that they don't become endangered.

"The monitoring and protection of the habitat where birds breed, winter and stopover is critical for their survival." (*Arctic Shorebird Decline*, Wildlife Conservation Society, November, 2017)

- 4) **Cumulative impacts must be addressed.** In 1985, during the study period for the first Coastal Plain EIS, there were three major oil fields in production on the North

Slope: Prudhoe, Kaparuk and Lisburne. At that time there was a push to open the Arctic Refuge to drilling as if there were no other opportunities to explore and develop oil. **Since that time, 30 additional fields have been discovered and put in production. The oil patch stretches more than 100 miles from the Canning River, which forms the western boundary the Arctic Refuge, to the Colville River and beyond into the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska**

The statistics from North Slope oil field infrastructure paints a picture. As of 2014 there were:

460 structures
6,215 producing wells
1, 1387 miles of road
901 miles of pipeline

Current proposed infrastructure on federal and state lands on the North Slope (outside the Arctic Refuge) would nearly double oil field structures to 816, increase production wells by a third to 8,673, double the road miles to 2,503, and quadruple pipeline miles to 4, 667 miles. (*A Synthesis of Existing, Planned, Proposed Infrastructure and Operations supporting Oil and Gas Activities and Commercial Transportation in Arctic Alaska* (K. Hillmer-Pegram, UAF, 2014)

It's important to closely evaluate the assumption that oil development on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge will only consume 2,000 acres. This creates a postage stamp image that is highly misleading. The size of proposed oil lease areas total as much as 800,000 acres, and any surface development would not be consolidated. Like the rest of the North Slope, pipelines, roads and drilling pads could be flung across the landscape, an industrial web stretching for hundreds of miles. In an open, treeless landscape, every building, drilling rig, landfill, airstrip, would be visible. **The wilderness would be gone and the region would no longer meet the definition of a wildlife refuge.**

Does this 2,000-acre proposition include seismic operation roads, pipeline corridors, air strips, and excavation of gravel pits? Is there a more realistic number of acres that reflects the true loss and degradation of habitat?

With oil development comes toxic spills, air and water pollution, noise, garbage, long-term changes in habitat availability, destruction of habitat, increase of scavenging foxes that can harm nesting birds. **Such environmental impacts and degradation contradict and violate the purposes of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.**

With extensive development and industrial impacts already on the North Slope, what will be the future for the Arctic if every last acre is open to drilling? Do we want an industrial wasteland stretching from Canada to the Chukchi Sea? Or should we be good stewards and protect some of our public lands for the diversity of Arctic species, for those who depend on wildlife for subsistence and cultural needs, or for those who appreciate the beauty of wilderness, the last remnant of frontier America?

Wilderness: An underlying purpose for the Arctic Refuge

In the early 1980s I assisted former Arctic Refuge manager, Ave Thayer, conducting a wilderness assessment of the coastal plain. We traversed the coastal plain and studied the expansive, rolling tundra and the surrounding scenic landscape and recreational values. Thayer's report was incorporated into the 1987 Coastal Plain Resource Assessment and concluded that the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge met the definition of wilderness under the Wilderness Act, with the exception of two DEW line sites on the coast that have since been cleaned up.

When the original Arctic Range was first established in 1960, it was created for the purposes of protecting its unique "wildlife, wilderness and recreational values." The wilderness character of the Arctic Refuge is unparalleled. **There is no other wildlife refuge in America established with a "wilderness" purpose.** The original wilderness of the Arctic Range was recognized and protected before the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964. That historic action was considered a precursor to the Wilderness Act.

The USFWS recommended that the coastal plain and the southern region of the Arctic Refuge be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System, and there continues to be widespread public support for a formal wilderness designation.

As part of the EIS, USFWS should evaluate all impacts from an oil and gas leasing program from seismic, exploration, development, production and transportation on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge and determine if such activities are compatible with the original wilderness purpose of the Arctic Refuge, and whether such activities would violate that wilderness purpose of establishment and ongoing management of the area. The USFWS should also evaluate the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts on the existing wilderness area south and east of the 1002 area (Mollie Beattie Wilderness Area).

The purposes of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge under the 1980 Alaska Lands Act and the recent 2017 Tax Bill new oil leasing purpose for the Arctic Refuge are not compatible.

There is no wildlife refuge in the United States with purposes that include the protection of wildlife and habitat, and the creation of an oil field. The 2017 Tax Bill created a new, unprecedented purpose for the Arctic Refuge --- oil and gas development of the coastal plain. **This new purpose is contradictory and incompatible with the other four purposes of the**

Arctic Refuge. Wildlife refuges in America have never been established for the purpose of conducting any industrial activity. Adding this industrial oil leasing use as a new purpose of the Arctic Refuge violates all the other existing purposes of the Arctic Refuge:

- 1) To conserve fish and wildlife populations and their habitats in their natural diversity;
- 2) To fulfill international treaty obligations; (such as the Polar Bear Agreement)
- 3) To provide an opportunity for local residents to continue their subsistence way of life;
- 4) To protect water quality and its quantity within the refuge.

Activities and infrastructure associated with oil field exploration and development are not compatible with the above purposes. Examples are as follows:

The 1987 Coastal Plain Resource Assessment EIS noted that **the Porcupine Caribou Herd would experience major effects if the 1002 Area was leased for development** including: 1) widespread, long-term change in habitat availability and quality that would modify natural abundance and distribution of the herd, 2) significant declines in use by maternal cows and calves around infrastructure, 3) disruption and failure to find insect relief habitat, leading to poor physical condition, 4) displacement because of obstacles that block passage and free movement. (Purpose # 1 violation)

If we allow critical polar bear denning habitat to be consumed by oil exploration and development activities, the United States will be in violation of Article 2 of the International Polar Bear Treaty signed by five nations. (Purpose #2 violation)

Oil field development will restrict local residents from Kaktovik from their normal subsistence hunting activities. You can't shoot guns near pipelines and oil field structures where you might kill a worker or damage equipment. **Oil fields lock up public lands so that subsistence hunting opportunities are diminished. Development in the calving and nursery ground of the Porcupine Herd can also cause significant negative impacts to the herd and threaten the subsistence way of life of the Gwich'in people.** (Purpose # 3 violation)

Unlike the sprawling wetlands around Prudhoe Bay and the NPRA, where there are countless big lakes, there are no large, deep lakes in the Arctic Refuge. **There is not enough water in the 1002 area to conduct oil exploration activities where as much as 15 million gallons of water are needed to drill a well. It's not feasible to allow drilling in an area that doesn't have enough water resources.** Any large industrial use of what little water is available would be harmful to overwintering fish populations and the aquatic environment (Purpose #4 violation)

In closing, the Department of Interior needs to carefully weigh all of the environmental and social effects and costs relating to any proposed oil leasing program and its related industrial operations, activities and infrastructure in the 1002 area. The industrialization of America's largest, wildest refuge will bring lasting scars to the land, its wildlife and its people. It would also be prudent for the department to weigh the cost of implementing this oil leasing program

from a taxpayer, human rights, and legal perspective. There is a tremendous opposition to drilling in the Arctic Refuge on a national and local level. Recent proposed legislation would repeal the 2017 Tax Bill oil leasing provision. It would be a waste of taxpayer money to implement a controversial, divisive program that will likely be challenged in the courts, and repealed through legislation.

One thing is certain. **Oil leasing and industrialization of the Arctic Refuge coastal plain is not compatible with the original purposes of the Arctic Refuge.** Turning a wildlife refuge into an oil field, and creating a new purpose that allows this incompatible use, is a blatant violation of the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act. Therefore, I urge the department to create a range of oil leasing alternatives in the EIS that include a **“No Action”** alternative based on a thorough analysis of direct, indirect and cumulative impacts from the full oil and gas program.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide scoping comments as you develop the parameters and address issues within the EIS.

Sincerely,

Debbie S. Miller

Related publications:

Midnight Wilderness: Journeys in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Braided River, 2011)

Arctic Wings: Birds of the Arctic Refuge (edited by Stephen Brown, Braided River, 2006)

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land (Banerjee, Braided River, 2002)

On Arctic Ground: Tracking Time Through Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve (Braided River, 2012)

A Caribou Journey (UAF Press, 1994)

A Polar Bear Journey (Walker, 2005)