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[EXTERNAL] Public Comment

1 message

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The Gwich'in Steering Committee [GSC] was formed 30 years ago in 1988 after reaching consensus in their traditional way. The GSC organized to speak with a united Gwich'in voice against oil and gas drilling in what the U.S. Government calls the Coastal Plain (perfunctorily, the 10-02 area) of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Coastal Plain is a 110-mile long and relatively narrow twenty to forty-mile-wide band of tundra between the Beaufort Sea and Brooks Range in northeastern Alaska. This is part of a wider Arctic region that spans northeast Alaska and northwest Canada in which Gwich'in People have lived for millennia entwined with caribou.

Gwich'in People have long called the Coastal Plain "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" or "the sacred place where life begins" because it provides a sheltered calving ground for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, upon which their People depend nutritionally for 80% of their diet, as well as spiritually and culturally. This caribou nursery ground is so sacred that Gwich'in people do not even enter it themselves, not even in times of famine.

For 30 years, the GSC has been presenting their case against incessant fossil fuel threats before U.S. Congress, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, and public hearings. Article 1 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, ratified by the U.S. Senate, reads in part: "...In no case may a People be deprived of their own means of subsistence."

Drilling in the Coastal Plain—the sacred place where life begins--would violate Gwich'in traditional practices and, at a particularly sensitive time in their life cycle, disrupt the caribou upon which Gwich'in People depend. Drilling would deprive the Gwich'in People of their right to continue their own way of life, and endanger their very future. There is no going back on this decision. Any activity in the Arctic Coastal Plain will cause permanent changes to the community and ecosystem. The US has broken nearly every agreement with indigenous communities through our entire history. We can be better.

As the current Gwich'in Steering Committee Chair, Bernadette Demientieff, wrote in an April 24 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner Op-Ed:

"Drilling in the Arctic Refuge will slice through the heart of these sacred lands, the heart of my people. The push to drill in the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge is a direct threat to my people. It is an attack on our culture and way of life.

Let me be clear. The Gwich'in, and all who stand with us, will fight to protect this sacred space. We will fight in every hall, every hearing, every election, every courtroom and every place of power; we will fight every step of the way."

I am one of those who stand with the Gwich'in, for their rights.

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