

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 4, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

We urge you to suspend any further action on the Willow Master Development Plan (Willow Plan) Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS). We are greatly concerned by the harmful impacts that this development could have on the unique ecological and subsistence values found in the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (Reserve). Interior's actions to move this, and other projects, forward during the COVID-19 crisis are contrary to the National Environmental Policy Act's mandate for public involvement. This is particularly true for the Willow Plan, which would significantly impact rural Alaska Native communities that have limited access to reliable high-speed internet, or other required forms of technology, necessary to be able to meaningfully participate in the process.

It is unacceptable for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to move forward with the Willow Plan public comment periods, public meetings, and subsistence hearings in the middle of a global pandemic that is especially dangerous to rural Alaska communities. The recent attempt at a virtual public meeting for North Slope residents was plagued by technological glitches and bandwidth constraints, and is in no way an acceptable substitute for an in-person meeting, particularly given the limited amount of high-speed internet connectivity and other necessary technology in the remote areas of Alaska where the people impacted by this proposal live. It is also unconscionable to request people currently focused on and concerned with the health and wellbeing of their families and communities to refocus their concern toward the complexities of a project like the Willow Plan, which itself will have significant effects on local people and resources. BLM has already lost a court case by failing to provide adequate public comment opportunities for oil and gas projects, and we believe your action with the SDEIS could face similar legal risk.¹

BLM has failed to recognize the cumulative infrastructure and development impacts ConocoPhillips' oil and gas project will have on the region. Neither the draft EIS nor the SDEIS is sufficient to fulfill BLM's NEPA requirement to consider a reasonable range of alternatives. Furthermore, the SDEIS fails to consider any alternatives that are protective of sensitive resources in the region. BLM should be maintaining the strongest possible protections for Special Areas within the Reserve. Instead, the proposed Willow Plan development encroaches into the Colville River and Teshekpuk Lake Special Areas. The proposed gravel mines would be adjacent to the Colville River Special Area, with a proposed gravel road and pipeline routing

¹ *W. Watersheds Project v. Zinke*, 2020 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 34612, 50 ELR 20047, __ F. Supp. 3d __, 2020 WL 959242

through the Special Area. The proposed oil and gas infrastructure and industrial activities will also extend into Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, an area that has been protected for decades because of its ecological value as the largest Arctic lake. Permanent infrastructure from this development will impact critical nesting areas for endangered bird species as well as high density, year-round range for the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd, causing lasting impacts to wildlife.

Rural communities on the North Slope rely upon subsistence resources like the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd, and threats to the health of these resources are threats to the traditional lifestyle of these communities. The proximity of the project to the community of Nuiqsut and its potential adverse impacts on subsistence resources and cultural activities are gravely concerning. Existing oil and gas projects have already degraded the region's air, water, and wildlife habitat. Continued industrialization of the Arctic will further disrupt traditional hunting and cultural activities.

The Willow Plan is a continuation of efforts by the Trump administration to advance its aggressive oil and gas development agenda, ignoring the public health, environmental, subsistence, and climate impacts these projects will have. The Administration's efforts for the Willow Plan are particularly egregious given the encroachment into the protected Special Areas, impact on subsistence resources, and the inadequate public outreach efforts during the COVID-19 crisis, which is effectively silencing Alaska Native voices by providing inadequate opportunities for public participation by the impacted communities in the process.

The Willow Master Development Plan will result in the loss of irreplaceable ecological and cultural values in America's Arctic. Now is not the time to be fast tracking permitting for a massive new oil development project. We urge BLM to focus on maintaining strong protections for Special Areas within the Reserve and not open additional acreage to new oil and gas projects.

Sincerely,



Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress



Deb Haaland
Member of Congress