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Groups sue Trump administration over illegal approval of Ambler road

Lawsuit charges agencies with violating ANILCA, NEPA, the Clean Water Act, and other laws

ANCHORAGE, Alaska—Nine groups sued the Trump administration today to challenge its approval of a commercial gravel road that would destroy, degrade and pollute Arctic land and water, and disrupt and harm the health of wildlife and people across a broad region in the southern Brooks Range.

The project applicant — the Alaska Industrial and Development Export Authority, a public corporation of the State of Alaska — would use public funding to subsidize the 211-mile Ambler road, which would be used solely by private mining interests.

"We remain committed to defending the Brooks Range, and preventing this destructive, unwanted, and unnecessary road from cutting through the heart of one of the largest intact ecosystems remaining in North America," said **Solaris Gillispie, the clean water and mining manager for the Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. "The harm this project would cause to the lives and livelihoods of those who depend on the clean water, wild foods, cultural, spiritual, and recreational opportunities this place provides would be irreparable. Additionally,

the road is a completely unacceptable use of public funds. Our state must commit to supporting Alaskans through challenging times, not subsidizing Outside mining companies. All Alaskans should be outraged at this waste of state money and dismissal of local wishes."

The industrial gravel road would cut through Gates of the Arctic National Preserve and pose numerous threats to the people, water, and wildlife of Northwest Alaska. It would slice through one of the longest wildlife migration paths in the world, cross nearly 3,000 rivers and streams, dam tundra wetlands, and interrupt traditional Alaska Native ways of life.

Local communities, including Allakaket, Ambler, Bettles, Evansville, Huslia, Kobuk, Kotzebue, Koyukuk, Loudon, Rampart, Ruby, and White Mountain have voiced opposition to the road, which would fragment caribou habitat, and diminish food security, water quality and access to hunting, fishing and traditional activities.

Today's [suit](#), filed in U.S. District Court in Alaska, says the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and Army Corps of Engineers failed to comply with the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Water Act and other federal laws and regulations by making final decisions based on a deeply flawed and inadequate environmental review. It also names the U.S Coast Guard as a defendant as the agency with permitting authority over the numerous bridges over navigable waters that would be needed for the project.

"The information gaps in the Ambler road permits and environmental review are massive," **said Bridget Psarianos, a staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** "These agencies lack the fundamental information necessary for permitting a project like this, including the location of the proposed road. The agencies' conclusion that this project will comply with environmental laws is akin to making a decision by shaking a Magic 8-Ball."

In March, AIDEA's board voted, without state legislative approval, to move \$35 million to fund the Ambler Road during an "emergency" meeting that was supposed to address funding for the COVID-19 public health and economic crisis. The state, through AIDEA, has already spent \$28 million on the project, and the projected cost of the project is upwards of one billion dollars. AIDEA has no agreement in place with any companies to pay back its public funding of the road.

Trustees for Alaska and the Western Mining Action Project filed the suit on behalf of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Earthworks, National Audubon Society, National Parks Conservation Association, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Winter Wildlands Alliance.

Group statements

"At a time when Alaska is facing a growing economic crisis, this is an unaffordable megaproject that would inflict environmental damage on the lands of Indigenous people," **said Karlin Itchoak, Alaska state director for The Wilderness Society.** "There is little to no evidence that the state would be reimbursed for the billion dollars or more it plans to spend. All the financial risk is on the state, while the benefits lie with the mining companies."

"Amid a global pandemic and economic crisis, the Trump administration has fast-tracked planning and disregarded the severe impacts that this billion-dollar private industrial mining road

will have on national parklands, Alaska Native communities and one of our planet's last ecologically intact landscapes," said **Alex Johnson, Alaska Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association**. "The National Parks Conservation Association rejects the administration's attempt to push through this industrial road that would slice through Gates of the Arctic National Preserve, cross the Kobuk Wild River, and interfere with one of Earth's greatest land migrations, of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd."

"A road from the Dalton Highway to Ambler would industrialize the Brooks Range, depriving future generations of this raw and wild landscape," said **Hilary Eisen, policy director for Winter Wildlands Alliance**. "We will do everything in our power to stop this road from fragmenting and polluting the lands and waters of the region, and to protect the health of the people, fish, and wildlife who rely on it."

"This mining road would be a disaster for Alaska's caribou and some of the last unspoiled wilderness in the country," said **Marc Fink, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity**. "We're in an extinction crisis and the last thing we need is a 211-mile industrial road bulldozed through Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve to enrich private developers."

"As Alaskans, we don't want to finance a road that will cause the loss of critical caribou habitat, degrade boreal forest that is important for rare songbirds like the Blackpoll Warbler, and threaten the future of Sandhill Cranes as well as other species important for regional food security in the face of climate change," said **Natalie Dawson, vice president and executive director at Audubon Alaska**. "We should be promoting long-term investments in sustainable, natural infrastructure to help our communities cope with climate change, not allowing international mining corporations to turn Alaskans' inheritance into short-term, exported profit."

"Alaskans know the importance of intact and healthy ecosystems, which is why opposition to this road has been immense from the start," says **Nicole Schmitt, Executive Director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance**. "The road would expose the Kobuk and Koyukuk watersheds to serious pollution, and people in the region rely on these watersheds for food and their ways of life. Animals like sheefish, arctic char, and a variety of salmon rely on these rivers, as do marine mammals such as seals and beluga whales. Terrestrially, this project would fragment caribou herd migrations, threaten critical bird habitat, and put stress on moose populations along the Koyukuk, Kobuk, Wild, Alatna, and John Rivers. The Brooks Range is an exceptionally productive, culturally and spiritually significant, and biologically important region in this state—extraordinarily more valuable than the short-term profits of an Outside mining company."

"It's a financial boondoggle to benefit a foreign mining company, while harming National Park lands and Alaska's largest caribou herd," said **Aaron Mintzes, senior policy counsel at Earthworks**. "It's irresponsible of the Trump Administration to jam a private mining road through valued public lands without any evidence that mining will occur or that those companies will ultimately cover the cost of the road."