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Court upholds Interior’s authority to suspend oil and gas leases in the Arctic Refuge

ANCHORAGE (AK)— A U.S. District Court dismissed all claims made by the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority and the State of Alaska in a lawsuit attempting to force the Department of the Interior to move forward an illegal drilling program on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Trustees for Alaska intervened in that lawsuit on behalf of the Gwich’in Steering Committee and 12 allied groups in March 2022 to defend the Department of the Interior’s suspension of leases and oil and gas activities on lands held sacred by the Gwich’in Peoples of Alaska and Canada. Today’s court ruling granted summary judgement for the Department of the Interior and Trustees for Alaska’s clients.

“This court decision rejects AIDEA’s careless agenda to drill on sacred lands and allows us to continue defending the Porcupine caribou herd and our traditional way of life from a destructive, disrespectful, needless and illegal leasing program,” **said Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee.** “We will always protect these sacred lands that connect our people culturally and spiritually. We will always protect the caribou.”

The Interior Department temporarily suspended the Arctic Refuge leases in early 2021 to conduct a new environmental analysis of a deeply flawed leasing program. Trustees for Alaska went to court over that leasing program in 2020 on behalf of the same set of clients. AIDEA brought its lawsuit in 2021, seeking to undo the pause on activities and temporary suspension of leases. AIDEA is a State of Alaska–owned corporation that obtained leases in the Arctic Refuge during the [flop lease sale](#) on Jan. 6, 2020.

“The court rightfully rejected AIDEA’s claims and reinforced the Interior Secretary’s and agencies’ discretion to implement the law,” **said Brook Brission, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “The 2020 leasing program is deeply flawed and a brutally destructive effort to exploit lands sacred to the Gwich’in and vital to the health of the interconnected lands, waters, plants, animals, and people of the Arctic. Today’s decision upholds the actions this Administration is taking to correct the legal problems with the 2020 leasing program and to ensure that the coastal plain is not sacrificed to oil in the meantime.”

Law firm Trustees for Alaska represents 13 clients in this lawsuit: Gwich’in Steering Committee, Alaska Wilderness League, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society-Yukon Chapter,

Defenders of Wildlife, Environment America, Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, National Wildlife Federation, National Wildlife Refuge Association, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Wilderness Watch.

Client statements

“We applaud the court’s decision to uphold Secretary Haaland’s moratorium on leasing activity in the Arctic Refuge,” **said Emily Sullivan, communications director for the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.** “While the 2021 lease sale drew virtually no bidders due to the proven risks of drilling on the coastal plain, AIDEA embarrassed Alaskans with its stubborn pursuit of leases. AIDEA should focus on its mission to diversify Alaska’s economy instead of wasting state funds, attempting to defend unlawful leases through unreasonable legal actions. It’s beyond time for AIDEA to move past its obsession with extractive industry and work towards a sustainable economy that serves all Alaskans, present and future.”

“The court’s order affirms what we have known all along: President Biden acted appropriately and in the best interests of taxpayers when he suspended the Arctic Refuge leases pending a thorough review of the many deficiencies in the Trump-era leasing program,” **said Karlin Itchoak, The Wilderness Society’s senior regional director for Alaska.** “The threat that oil drilling poses to Indigenous rights and the irreplaceable landscape demands responsible, comprehensive and science-based analysis.”

“Today’s court ruling confirmed that the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge can’t be determined solely by reading a few sentences authorizing oil and gas lease sales – snuck into a bill without thorough discussion in 2017 – while ignoring conservation and subsistence laws that were carefully crafted to protect our nation’s air, land, waters and traditions,” **said Andy Moderow, senior director of policy for Alaska Wilderness League.** “That’s precisely what the Trump administration did when it issued leases to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority. We celebrate today’s ruling because it confirms the right of President Biden and the Department of the Interior to correct the Trump administration’s mistakes, restoring thoughtful decision-making that honors the intent and direction our nation’s conservation laws.”

“This decision is a victory for Alaska’s communities, landscapes, and wildlife,” **said Andrea Finger, director of the Sierra Club’s Alaska Chapter.** “AIDEA’s attempt to push forward with destructive oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge without study was reckless. Today’s decision makes it clear that even AIDEA has to follow the law.”

“We are pleased and not surprised that the court kicked AIDEA’s spurious claims to the curb,” **said Pat Lavin, Alaska policy advisor, Defenders of Wildlife.** “Today’s decision serves to remind everyone what a flop the January 6, 2021 Arctic Refuge oil and gas lease sale truly was. Despite billion-dollar revenue projections from drilling proponents, not one oil company bid on that sale, which was mandated by the ill-advised 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. The Arctic Refuge is a national treasure, home to spectacular wildlife including threatened polar bears and the Porcupine caribou herd, which has provided physical and cultural sustenance to the Gwich’in people for millennia. We stand with the Gwich’in and the vast majority of Americans who support protecting the Arctic Refuge, and we again call upon Congress to repeal this harmful leasing program.”

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