

## **Indigenous leaders, Environmental Organizations Applaud Biden Administration Announcement to Cancel Trump Issued Oil and Gas Leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**

For media inquiries: Genae Lako, 303-918-6290, [genae.lako@gmail.com](mailto:genae.lako@gmail.com)

*(Organizational contacts below)*

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Washington, D.C. – Today, the Biden administration announced that the Department of the Interior is canceling the last remaining oil and gas leases on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This announcement is a historic win for America’s Arctic and honors the rights of Indigenous People who have been working to protect their sacred lands in the Arctic Refuge for decades. Alongside the Gwich’in Steering Committee, Tribal Governments, and Iñupiat allies, we celebrate this announcement and applaud the Biden administration for taking one more step towards protecting this irreplaceable landscape and our climate future. The Biden administration also announced the next step in the much-needed process for re-assessing the environmental impacts of the Arctic Refuge oil and gas leasing program.

AIDEA – the state of [Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority](#) – acquired the leases under a rushed 2021 Trump lease sale that was held on legally dubious grounds. Since that time, every other lessee has [walked away](#) from drilling in the Arctic Refuge, leaving AIDEA the sole lease holder.

**Bernadette Dementieff, the Executive Director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee**, shared “AIDEA’s leases were economically infeasible, unlawful, and threatened the Porcupine Caribou Herd and the Gwich’in way of life. We thank the Biden administration and Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland for taking this step towards protecting [Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit](#) (The Sacred Place Where Life Begins), but we know that our sacred land is only temporarily safe from oil and gas development. We urge the administration and our leaders in Congress to repeal the oil and gas program and permanently protect the Arctic Refuge.”

Members of our coalition shared the following statements:

“The **Arctic Village and Venetie Tribal governments** want to extend deep gratitude to the Department of Interior for making the just decision to cancel all Arctic Refuge leases. Allowing any development would irrevocably damage the Refuge, the land upon which we deeply depend. This is a significant step towards true, meaningful protection of these lands that are so vital to the survival of our people now and into the future. Our community has already seen the effects that development can have on our way of life. Recent caribou migration seasons have been increasingly uncertain as the climate changes at a rapid and exponential rate. Any further disruption to the ecological health of these lands puts our very existence at risk, and by canceling these leases, an increasingly uncertain future has become more secure. In addition to preserving these lands, this is a significant recognition of our Tribal Government’s urgent, long-standing appeal to respect our way of life that depends unequivocally on the Refuge. By acknowledging our rights as a sovereign government to continue to exist in concert with this land, the Federal Government is one step closer

to cultivating a true and productive Government-to-government relationship between the United States and our Tribal Governments. Our people thank you for this historic step towards maintaining Indigenous rights and sovereignty.”

“We commend Secretary Haaland for canceling unlawfully issued oil-and-gas leases in the Arctic Refuge,” said **Abigail Dillen, President of Earthjustice**. “This decisive action undoes an egregious attack on this cherished place and will help to vindicate the rights of Indigenous people and protect vital habitat. Looking ahead, we hope to see the strongest possible protections for the Arctic Refuge and the Western Arctic in the years to come.”

“We are thrilled to see the Biden administration’s decision to cancel AIDEA’s leases and re-examine the coastal plain leasing program,” said **Emily Sullivan, communications director for the Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. “Today’s announcement is a huge win for Indigenous rights and the Arctic ecosystem—while we still have work ahead of us to protect this vital landscape, we are confident that canceling these illegal leases has set us on the right track.”

“It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of today’s announcement for the Indigenous peoples in this region, whose cultures and communities depend on the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The herd’s calving ground is once again free of oil leases, our climate is a bit safer and there is renewed hope for permanently protecting one of the last great wild landscapes in America,” said **Jamie Williams, president of The Wilderness Society**. “We are profoundly grateful to the Biden administration for taking this step to protect what the Gwich’in know as *Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit* – The Sacred Place Where Life Begins – and we call on Congress to repeal the Arctic Refuge oil and gas leasing provision in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act and take action to permanently protect the coastal plain for future generations.”

“Today is a good day for climate, Indigenous communities, and our Arctic ecosystem. At a time when the reality of the climate crisis is daily news, the Biden administration is taking necessary action in the Arctic to move us toward a more sustainable future. Leases should have never been granted in the Arctic Refuge under President Trump’s illegal Coastal Plain leasing program, especially to AIDEA – a state-owned development corporation with a track record of failures and no oil and gas experience,” said **Kristen Miller, executive director of Alaska Wilderness League**. “Today’s action shows the Biden administration’s commitment to long-term climate and conservation solutions for this region. The end to illegal leases, along with strong action toward new conservation protections, show the bold action we need to preserve America’s Arctic and address climate change.”

“Today’s decision to cancel AIDEA leases puts right a wrong—those leases were based on a Trump-endorsed leasing program that is rife with legal errors and never should have been issued in the first place,” said **Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney with Trustees**. “Today’s actions are a step toward protecting the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge from reckless and needless industrialization and fossil fuel exploitation that would sacrifice communities, animals, the planet, and future generations.”

“We are thrilled that the Biden Administration has canceled these illegal leases,” said **Marilyn Sigman, President of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges**. “The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is home to a rich biodiversity of wildlife that depend on the large stretches of intact habitat found in the coastal plain and beyond. We thank the President and Secretary Haaland for their support for protecting this jewel of the Refuge System.”

“It’s long past time to stop sacrificing irreplaceable wildlife habitat and Indigenous lands to deepen our dependence on the fossil fuels driving the climate crisis. This puts our future first. It protects the realms of birthing caribou and migratory birds. It safeguards lands the Gwich’in people rely on for their livelihood, said **Manish Bapna, President and CEO of NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council)**. “Public lands are a public trust. They must be part of the climate solution – not the problem. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the nation’s largest wildlife refuge. It’s no place for oil and gas drilling and all the damage and danger it brings.”

“Faith communities across the country have stood in solidarity with the Gwich’in to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil drilling and exploration, “said **Cassandra Carmichael, Executive Director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment**. “In canceling the Arctic Refuge leases, President Biden is not only honoring the sacredness of this unique and fragile part of God’s creation, but is acknowledging that protecting the way of life of the Gwich’in is a matter of justice and faithfulness.”

“We applaud the Biden administration for taking these meaningful steps to safeguard the ecologically and culturally irreplaceable Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Birds migrating from every state and numerous countries, connecting people and communities around the globe, rely on this landscape to complete their life cycle,” says **David Krause, interim executive director of Audubon Alaska**. “Canceling oil-and-gas leases in the Arctic Refuge ensures the health of the world’s bird nursery and the protection of Indigenous lifeways.”

“With the cancelation of these leases, this decision serves as a beacon of hope; for the life and land of the Arctic Refuge, for the sovereignty of the Gwich’in and Inupiat communities, and for addressing the climate and biodiversity crisis of Planet Earth,” said **Helen Cherullo, Braided River Executive Director**

“To quote President Biden, this is a big f-ing deal. Oil and gas drilling in the Arctic Refuge is incompatible with the long-term survival of the Arctic, the Gwich’in Nation’s way of life, and life as we know it. By protecting these landscapes and canceling these leases, the White House has made it clear they will take bold action to avert climate catastrophe,” said **Ben Jealous, executive director of the Sierra Club**. “The effort to protect and preserve the Arctic Refuge was one of the first major battles of the modern environmental movement. Now, the Arctic and the communities and wildlife that rely on it are on the frontlines of climate change. Today, in listening to the Gwich’in Nation and the American people, President Biden showed that this treasured landscape is also the frontline of climate action.”

“Defenders applauds the Biden administration for recognizing the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’s unique values and cancelling these questionable leases. The 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,” said **Jamie Rappaport Clark, President and CEO, Defenders of Wildlife**. “We stand with the Gwich’in and the vast majority of Americans who support protecting the Arctic Refuge and are grateful the Biden administration addressed the insufficiencies and legal violations of the previous administration’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge oil and gas leasing program. We now call on Congress to listen to the American people and repeal the program completely, protecting this unique and irreplaceable wildlife refuge in perpetuity.”

“Protecting the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a victory for the Gwich’in People and the iconic wildlife that depend on the refuge for survival. This action will help ensure

that we're not further exacerbating the accelerating climate impacts and habitat fragmentation in the Arctic," said **Collin O'Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation**. "We thank the Biden Administration for taking this important conservation action and urge Congress to permanently protect this crown jewel of the National Wildlife Refuge System."

"This is a monumental step in the right direction. We must continue to do all we can to permanently protect the Arctic Refuge from harmful oil and gas development," said **Steve MacLean, Managing Director, World Wildlife Fund Arctic Program**. "Science is warning us that fossil fuels need to stay in the ground, greenhouse gas emissions are now 50% higher than pre-industrial levels. We appreciate the Biden Administration's ongoing efforts to support long-term protection of America's Arctic: a vital ecosystem essential to the well-being of wildlife, communities and our entire planet."

"The Arctic Refuge is like nowhere else on Earth, hosting roaming caribou herds, a kaleidoscope of migratory birds, denning polar bears and so much more," said **Steve Blackledge, Senior Conservation Campaigns Director for Environment America**. "Arctic wildlife are already struggling. To give them a fighting chance, we need to safeguard their habitats, and that means no leasing and no drilling in the refuge."

"The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is an integral part of our nation's conservation heritage," said **Geoffrey L. Haskett, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. "As one of the largest tracts of untouched wilderness and most ecologically diverse areas in the United States, it is up to all of us to ensure our Arctic Refuge remains permanently protected to safeguard the irreplaceable landscapes that innumerable species of wildlife call home. We thank the Biden administration for taking this important step towards long-lasting protection of its wildlife and the continued way of life for the Indigenous peoples of northeastern Alaska."

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## **Media Contacts**

Gwich'in Steering Committee: Bernadette Dementieff, 907-371-8028

Arctic Village and Venetie Tribal governments: Olivia Hall, [Olivia.sam@narf.org](mailto:Olivia.sam@narf.org)

Alaska Wilderness League: Andy Moderow, 907-306-3622, [Andy@alaskawild.org](mailto:Andy@alaskawild.org)

World Wildlife Fund: Sarah Fogel, 917-749-0990, [Sarah.Fogel@wwfus.org](mailto:Sarah.Fogel@wwfus.org)

Defenders of Wildlife: Sue Libenson, 907-303-0022, [SLibenson@defenders.org](mailto:SLibenson@defenders.org)

Environment America: Steve Blackledge, (916) 500-7290, [sblackledge@environmentamerica.org](mailto:sblackledge@environmentamerica.org)

Sierra Club: Ian Brickey, (202-675-6270), [ian.brickey@sierraclub.org](mailto:ian.brickey@sierraclub.org)

Trustees for Alaska: Dawnell Smith, 907-433-2013, [dsmith@trustees.org](mailto:dsmith@trustees.org)

Audubon Alaska: Lauren Cusimano, 907-433-5300, [lauren.cusimano@audubon.org](mailto:lauren.cusimano@audubon.org)

NRDC: Anne Hawke, 202-329-1463, [ahawke@nrdc.org](mailto:ahawke@nrdc.org)

The Wilderness Society: Tim Woody, 907-223-2443, [tim\\_woody@twc.org](mailto:tim_woody@twc.org)

National Wildlife Refuge Association: Geoffrey L. Haskett, 505-401-5298, [ghaskett@refugeassociation.org](mailto:ghaskett@refugeassociation.org)