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March 25, 2025

Court ruling lets AIDEA keep Arctic Refuge leases despite legal problems with the leasing program

Today the U.S. District Court in Alaska ruled that the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, or AIDEA, can hold onto its oil and gas leases from the 2021 lease sale in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. AIDEA challenged the Interior Department's cancellations of those leases in 2023. Trustees for Alaska intervened in that lawsuit on behalf of the Gwich'in Steering Committee and allied groups to defend Interior's authority to cancel invalid leases.

"This court decision lets a state agency with little transparency or accountability hold onto oil and gas leases on lands sacred to the Gwich'in," said **Kristen Moreland, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee**. "This disappointing ruling ignores the destruction oil drilling will do to our communities and only deepens our resolve in fiercely defending the coastal plain from oil and gas extraction. We will always protect the caribou, our way of life, and future generations."

Legal problems with the 2020 leasing program prompted the Biden administration to put a temporary moratorium on all activities weeks after the Jan. 6 auction. Interior suspended leases in 2021 and cancelled them in 2023. Interior found that the leasing program had improperly interpreted and applied the 2017 Tax Act and failed to properly consider greenhouse gas emissions.

"AIDEA being allowed to hold onto those leases is problematic in light of legal problems with the program at large," said **Vicki Clark, executive director of Trustees for Alaska**. "The poorly and hastily developed Trump leasing plan broke multiple laws, and our current litigation challenging that decision is ongoing. Leasing these lands sacred to the Gwich'in Peoples of Alaska and Canada to AIDEA would have real and devastating consequences to the health of those local communities, Arctic animals, and Earth's climate future."

AIDEA offered low bids on the leases but has no ability to extract oil and gas. The agency has been under scrutiny for lacking public transparency and legislative oversight and failing to bring economic benefits for Alaskans. [Recent reports](#) demonstrate how the quasi-state agency has made consistently poor financial investments.

More recently, the Biden administration held a second lease sale, as required by the Tax Act. No company bid on any of the leases offered. Nevertheless, the Trump Administration has said that it will continue to hold more leases on these sacred lands.

Law firm Trustees for Alaska represents the Gwich'in Steering Committee and 12 other clients in the case: Alaska Wilderness League, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society—Yukon Chapter, Defenders of Wildlife, Environment America, Friends of Alaska Wildlife Refuges, Alaska Wildlife Federation, Alaska Wildlife Refuge Association, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, The Wilderness Society, Wilderness Watch. The Sierra Club represents itself in the case.

GROUP STATEMENTS:

“The court’s decision to uphold AIDEA’s oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is beyond disappointing,” **said Elisabeth Balster Dabney, executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.** “The first Trump administration—in a rush to issue coastal plain leases before leaving office—shirked the many legal processes that are in place to protect vital landscapes like the Refuge. The Department of the Interior acted in good faith to rectify these legal errors by canceling the leases. To vacate that decision cancelling the leases is a legal travesty and an incredible setback for Alaska’s people, wildlife, and waters.”

“This is a deeply disappointing ruling that endangers the Indigenous peoples in this region whose cultures, communities and traditional lifeways are tied to the Porcupine Caribou Herd,” **said Meda DeWitt, Alaska senior manager for The Wilderness Society.** “The Arctic’s Indigenous communities are now forced to fight for their rights and ways of life, and to defend lands and subsistence resources from a reckless assault on the Arctic, public lands across Alaska, and the global environment.”

“We are disappointed in today’s ruling, because AIDEA has no business holding drilling rights in the Arctic Refuge, particularly under the terms of the flawed Trump-era leasing program,” **said Andy Moderow, senior director of policy for Alaska Wilderness League.** “AIDEA is the ‘grim reaper’ of Alaska megaprojects – when they show up to spend money, smart investors stay away. We will continue to challenge their misguided attempts to industrialize the Arctic Refuge, so that the Coastal Plain can sustain continued and new traditions for generations to come.”

“Today’s decision to allow for Trump-era leases hastily issued to a state corporation for a paltry sum is deeply disappointing, and we remain fully opposed to industrializing the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” **said Patrick Lavin, Defenders of Wildlife senior policy advisor.** “Home to polar bears, caribou, and many other wildlife species, the Arctic Refuge is one of our nation’s most iconic landscapes and is known as ‘The Sacred Place Where Life Begins’ to the indigenous Gwich’in people.”

“The court’s ruling to reject the cancellation of the leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a great disappointment and one we do not agree with,” **said Desirée Sorenson-Groves, President and CEO of the National Wildlife Refuge Association.** “This battle may not be won but we will not cede the fight to protect the Arctic Refuge from disastrous oil and gas development.”

“Oil and gas drilling in the Arctic Refuge is incompatible with the long-term survival of the Arctic and the Gwich’in Nation’s way of life,” **said Athan Manuel, director of Sierra Club’s Lands Protection Program.** “Today’s ruling further jeopardizes Arctic landscapes, wildlife, and the communities who rely on them. The Arctic is on the front line of climate change, and we will continue to work to protect these critical and fragile landscapes for generations to come.”

“The decision to overturn the cancellation of oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a devastating defeat for the Gwich’in People and for wildlife that depend on the refuge for survival. Oil and gas development in the crown jewel of the wildlife refuge system is tremendously short-sighted and will exacerbate the challenges already facing porcupine caribou, polar bears and more than 100 species of migratory birds,” said **David Willms, associate vice president for public lands at the National Wildlife Federation**. “This decision also is a setback for the hunters, anglers, and other outdoor recreationists who cherish this wildlife paradise.”

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