



TRUSTEES FOR ALASKA

PROTECT | DEFEND | REPRESENT

January 13, 2026

For Immediate Release

Gwich'in Steering Committee, allied groups take latest Arctic Refuge leasing program to court

Today's filing amends and supplements claims challenging agencies for failing legal obligations to land, wildlife, and people.

ANCHORAGE (AK)— The Gwich'in Steering Committee and 12 allied groups filed an amended and supplemental complaint today in their 2020 lawsuit challenging the Trump administration with violating multiple laws and ignoring impacts to people, caribou, and ways of life when finalizing a leasing program that would hand over the entire coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas leasing and exploitation. Despite the numerous legal violations with the 2020 program, the Trump administration held a lease sale on Jan. 6, 2021, and issued leases to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority just days before leaving office after his first term.

Trustees for Alaska filed the initial lawsuit in 2020 but then agreed to pause it during the Biden administration while agencies attempted to fix the program's profound legal problems. Interior finalized a 2024 plan that offered fewer acres for lease and held a lease sale in January 2025, which drew no bids. The Trump administration readopted the illegal 2020 plan last October and reinstated the unlawful leases that had been issued in 2021. Today's filing updates that litigation to address the Trump administration's decisions re-adopting that program and unsuspending the unlawful leases.

"The Gwich'in have been fighting—and succeeding—for decades in protecting the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd," said **Kristen Moreland, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee**. "Today, we continue that fight and are grateful to our allies that stand with us. It is unconscionable that this administration is advancing an Arctic Refuge leasing plan, which is opposed by the majority of Americans, would violate our rights as Alaska Native people, and blatantly contains multiple legal deficiencies. This is yet another attempt by the administration to prioritize profits over people, and we say enough is enough."

The Gwich'in Nation of Alaska and Canada oppose oil leasing and activities of any kind on the coastal plain, a place they consider sacred because of its importance to the health of the Porcupine caribou herd and their way of life. A [recent Alaska Department of Fish and Game report](#) shows marked declines in the Porcupine and Central Arctic caribou herds, an indicator of a region that requires care and protection, not recklessness.

"This leasing program prioritizes oil and gas leasing and extraction over the health of land, wildlife, and Arctic ways of life, defying and violating the very purposes of this place as established by law," said **Bridget Psarianos, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska**. "This administration continues to ignore local communities with their ways of life at stake, doubled down on its careless approach to the health of the Arctic and future generations, put extraction ahead of all other uses of the land, and disregarded the law. We will absolutely stand with clients in protecting the Arctic."

The lawsuit charges the Interior Secretary, Interior Department, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with violating many laws, including the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Wilderness Act, and the Endangered Species Act—all laws that protect our nation's public lands, waters, wildlife, and people.

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

"Oil and gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge not only threatens the sacred land of the Gwich'in People, but also essential habitat for diverse wildlife populations including porcupine caribou, polar bears, musk oxen, wolves, and hundreds of species of birds," said **Kristen Byrnes Floom, public lands attorney for the National Wildlife Federation**. "The unlawful push to open this crown jewel of the wildlife refuge system to oil and gas development ignores the best available science, disregards the rights of Indigenous

communities and value of native wildlife, and ignores overwhelming public support for safeguarding this pristine habitat for future generations."

"The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge sustains an extraordinary abundance of wildlife that would be irreparably harmed by oil and gas development," said **Nicole Whittington-Evans, senior director of Alaska and Northwest Programs with Defenders of Wildlife**. "As sea ice disappears, threatened Southern Beaufort Sea polar bears have increasingly been forced to move to the coastal plain — making untouched land in the Refuge essential for denning mothers and the future of the population. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently found that putting oil rigs on the coastal plain will be lethal to polar bear cubs, and that the oil and gas program would decrease the chance of survival for hundreds of cubs over its duration. We will not stand by and allow this heartless and unlawful move to open critical habitat to development go unchallenged."

"This administration's reckless leasing program on the Arctic coastal plain – and AIDEA's unlawful leases – are an attack on the Porcupine Caribou Herd as well as the Indigenous peoples who have lived in deep relationship with the Arctic Refuge since time immemorial," said **Meda DeWitt, Alaska Senior Manager for The Wilderness Society**. "As we stand with the Gwich'in and Iñupiaq who oppose this destruction, it is vital that the courts recognize that this administration is placing corporate interests above the lives, cultures and spiritual responsibilities of the people whose survival depends on the health of the Arctic Refuge."

"The Arctic Refuge is one the last great Wildernesses left on Earth. The thought of turning it into another poisoned, industrial wasteland should offend every American," stated **George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch**. "These unlawfully issued leases need to be cancelled and this irreplaceable home to great caribou herds, polar bears, foxes, grizzlies, wolves and all the other critters that live there must be kept secure."

"Oil and gas drilling in the Arctic Refuge jeopardizes fragile landscapes and wildlife and threatens the Gwich'in who depend on caribou that use the Coastal Plain," said **Athan Manuel, director of Sierra Club's Lands Protection Program**. "For nearly a decade, the Trump administration made it clear that handing the Refuge over to oil and gas companies was a top priority, and the result was one of the most legally deficient processes in recent memory. Drilling in this place is incompatible with its long-term survival, and we will continue to support the Gwich'in and work with our allies to protect these critical and fragile landscapes for generations to come."

Contacts:

Dawnell Smith, communications director, Trustees for Alaska, (907) 433-2013,
dsmith@trustees.org

Genae Lako, Gwich'in Steering Committee Communications, 303-918-6290, genae.lako@gmail.com

Tim Woody, Alaska communications manager, The Wilderness Society,
tim_woody@tws.org, 907-223-2443

Ian Brickey, associate director of federal communications, The Sierra Club, ian.brickey@sierraclub.org, 202-675-6270

Mary Jo Brooks, senior communications manager for public lands, National Wildlife Federation, brooksm@nwf.org, 303-549-8351