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Lawsuit challenges Trump's massive public lands giveaway in Alaska

Interior decision opens 2 million acres to industrialization and attempts to fast track Ambler road

Ten Alaska and national groups sued the Interior Department today for unlawfully removing federal protections over public lands in an area stretching from the Yukon River to the Brooks Range. These lands had been protected for over 50 years and subject to federal oversight that intended to ensure Arctic health and a stable corridor for the Dalton Highway and Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

The removal of federal protections, put in place in the early 1970s via Public Land Orders 5150 and 5180, will make way for a takeover of these lands by the State of Alaska and open these lands for mining claims and other activities. Transferring these lands to the State of Alaska would lower the bar for protecting subsistence and mitigating impacts when permitting extractive projects. This decision removes vital protections for subsistence users who depend on the area for their way of life.

"These public lands orders should never have been revoked without a thorough environmental review, public accountability, and meaningful consultation with the communities the most directly affected," **said Krystal Lapp, President of the Board for Northern Alaska Environmental Center.** "These two million acres form an essential ecological connection between Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and support world-renowned wildlife migrations, subsistence hunting and fishing, and intact Arctic ecosystems. Eliminating these protections opens the door to state land selections, mining claims, and industrial development in one of the most ecologically significant landscapes in North America."

Handing these decades-long protected federal lands to the state benefits mining interests and industrial projects like the proposed Ambler mining road and would take the corridor encompassing the Trans-Alaska Pipeline out of federal ownership. The Interior Secretary made this decision in February without taking any public comments and held no

hearings in affected local communities, despite acknowledging that this land giveaway would have severe environmental impacts and harm subsistence users.

[The lawsuit](#), filed in the U.S. District Court in Anchorage, asserts that agencies violated the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act by failing to meet legal obligations to protect land, wildlife, waterways, subsistence use, and communities.

“The Trump administration conjured up flimsy and vacuous reasons about ‘putting America first’ to try to justify transferring public lands out of federal management to benefit billionaires,” **said Bridget Psarianos, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska**. “Removing protections panders to the mining industry and disregards the public’s interest in sound decision-making, community health, public land use, and transparency about how decisions get made. This administration continues its agenda of giving public lands to private interests through any means possible, no matter what laws get broken and what communities get hurt.”

Nonprofit law firm Trustees for Alaska represents ten clients in the case: Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Earthworks, National Parks Conservation Association, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Winter Wildlands Alliance.

Client statements:

“The Dalton Corridor is not an empty stretch of tundra waiting to be exploited,” **said Nicole Schmitt, executive director of Alaska Wildlife Alliance**. “It is a vast ecosystem spanning boreal forest, Arctic mountains, and high Arctic tundra. These ecosystems support the migration of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, along with salmon-bearing rivers, Dall sheep lambing grounds, habitat for grizzly bears, wolves, and countless other species, as well as subsistence hunting grounds for Alaska Native communities. The current administration has been clear in its intent to open federal lands to extraction industries. Opening 2.1 million acres of the Dalton Corridor to mining claims also sets a dangerous precedent for revoking Public Land Orders that protect federal lands. If the land grab proceeds, it could become a playbook for federal lands across Alaska and the West to be opened to energy and mineral development.”

"We will not allow our public lands to be stripped of protections and opened for industrial mining," **said Pamela Miller, Executive Director of Alaska Community Action Toxics**. "These actions would lead to irreparable harm to the lands, fish, and wildlife in one of the most fragile and culturally rich places in the world. The administration has an obligation to protect the food security, sovereignty, health, and human rights of the Alaska Native communities that call this place home."

“Alaska’s public lands – and the traditions that rely on them – are under attack across Alaska today, and this area in northern Alaska requires vigorous action to halt industrialization,” **said Andy Moderow, Senior Director of Policy of Alaska Wilderness League.** “Alaska’s clean air, lands, waters, and healthy wildlife populations allow for so many traditions. Fortunately, there are laws in place that protect what makes Alaska extraordinary. We look forward to the court’s consideration of this matter, so that future generations of Alaskans have the same opportunities that Alaskans do today.”

“National Parks Conservation Association rejects the administration’s latest attempt to give away America’s public lands and force through the speculative Ambler industrial mining road,” **said Jim Adams, senior Alaska director of National Parks Conservation Association.** “Revoking PLO 5150 and 5180 would allow for the transfer of 2.1 million acres of priceless public lands and their waterways and wildlife to the state of Alaska. It’s a blatant effort to avoid national environmental laws to allow construction of a road that will enrich foreign mining companies and harm wild lands, Alaska Native communities, and America’s conservation legacy. Ending these public land orders also exposes the entire eastern side of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve to state management practices along its border that devalue park wildlife and the needs of rural residents.”

“The Trump administration’s destructive obsession with giving away our public lands for the benefit of mining companies has forced us to go to court,” **said Matt Jackson, Alaska senior manager for The Wilderness Society.** “These lands – as well as the abundant wildlife and clean air and water they provide – have protected communities in northern rural Alaska from unwanted development for generations and we must preserve the freedom of rural Alaskans to continue hunting, fishing, and exploring these places now and in the future.”

“This decision to remove protections from these irreplaceable public lands smacks of corruption,” **said Aaron Mintzes, deputy policy director at Earthworks.** “On behalf of the federal government, the administration recently bought shares in Trilogy Metals, the mining company that would profit from the damaging Ambler road that would subsidize their speculative mine.”

“The Trump administration has violated the law and gambled with Alaska’s future by scrapping these vital public lands protections,” **said Rebecca Noblin, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.** “The areas now at risk of being bulldozed and mined are packed with fish, birds, caribou and their rich habitat. It’s incredibly important for local communities and the health of Alaska’s wild places that we preserve this corridor and keep federal protections in place.”

“Alaska has some of the last truly wild places left in the United States, and they are protected by law,” **said Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club’s Director of Conservation.** “Industrial proposals like the Ambler Road and expanded LNG production will cause irreversible damage to these precious landscapes. We’re taking the Trump Administration to court to protect these public lands for the next generation.”

“Alaska’s Brooks Range is one of the last truly wild landscapes left in America,” **said Anneka Williams, policy director at Winter Wildlands Alliance.** “The Ambler road — which could be more easily permitted following this contemplated land swap — would intersect the migration route of three caribou herds, destroy intact ecosystems, and eliminate one-of-a-kind backcountry recreation experiences. The Interior Department ignored its own findings and the law in moving forward with this decision. When agencies sidestep the legal safeguards that protect our public lands, we have a responsibility to challenge that.”

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