

February 14, 2005

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As scientists and natural resource managers from the United States and Canada with many years of experience in ecology, wildlife and conservation biology, and resource management, we encourage you to reconsider plans for exploring and developing the potential oil and gas reserves of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain.

Please understand that we are not philosophically opposed to oil and gas development in Alaska. Indeed, we all clearly recognize the need for balanced resource management. However, we also recognize the importance of maintaining the biological diversity and ecosystem integrity of our nation's Arctic. The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is particularly valuable for protecting that biological diversity. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the United States' only conservation unit that encompasses an intact arctic ecosystem, is invaluable for scientific research. It is also uniquely sensitive to disturbance, making it virtually impossible to mitigate the effects of oil development. Sacrificing this ecosystem for an insignificant supply of our nation's energy that will not reach the market for a decade does not represent balanced resource management. Instead, we urge you to support permanent protection of the Arctic Refuge's coastal plain.

Five decades of biological study and scientific research have confirmed that the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge forms a vital component of the biological diversity of the refuge and the arctic region generally. In contrast to the broad coastal plain to the west of the Arctic Refuge, the coastal plain within the refuge is much narrower. This unique compression of habitats concentrates the occurrence of a wide variety of wildlife and fish species, including polar bears, grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines, caribou, muskoxen, Dolly Varden, Arctic grayling, snow geese, and more than 130 other species of migratory birds. In fact, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Arctic Refuge coastal plain contains the greatest wildlife diversity of any protected area above the Arctic Circle.

In March of 2001 more than 500 scientists wrote to you concerning the grave impacts oil development would have on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge. Since that time, the National Academies of Science, the U.S. Geological Survey, the international Arctic Climate Impact Assessment Secretariat, and others have issued additional findings about the impacts of oil development in Arctic ecosystems, providing further evidence that if oil development proceeds, much of the wildlife, water, and cultural resources for which the Arctic Refuge was established would be severely diminished or lost. In addition, recent studies reveal that the potential oil reserves of the refuge are distributed throughout the coastal plain, requiring development to spread across most of the coastal plain, which would compound the impacts of oil development.

There is further evidence of the threats of industrial development to the 130,000-strong Porcupine Caribou Herd, the largest international migratory caribou herd in the world, and for which the United States shares a management agreement with Canada. The U.S. Geological Survey's Biological Resources Division, in their 2002 report on wildlife research on the Arctic Refuge, found that the herd may be particularly sensitive to development within the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, its essential calving and post-calving habitat. Studies of the Central Arctic Herd, which overlap the Prudhoe Bay Oil Fields, have shown that caribou cows and calves avoid roads and pipelines during calving. Although the Central Arctic Herd has increased over the last three decades, the portion of the herd that calved in the oil fields was actually displaced to undeveloped areas to the south. The low productivity of the Arctic Refuge's Porcupine Caribou Herd indicates that it has a low capacity to accommodate additional stresses. Lacking high-quality alternate calving habitat, the Porcupine herd would likely undergo much higher calf mortality if displaced by oil infrastructure. Simply put, development of the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge would likely have significant detrimental effects on this international herd. These findings were corroborated in the National Academies of Science in their 2003 report, "The Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil And Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope."

The 2002 U.S. Geological Survey report also found that the Western Canadian Arctic population of snow geese depends on staging areas in the coastal plain of the Arctic refuge to build fat reserves before its long migration south. Studies have shown that snow geese are extremely sensitive to disturbance. Displacement of geese from their feeding areas on the Arctic Refuge is of particular concern because feeding habitats are limited. It is unlikely that snow geese would be able to find adequate habitat if displaced from the Arctic Refuge. This would substantially reduce their ability to survive their one thousand mile non-stop

migration south.

In 2004, the international Arctic Climate Impact Assessment Secretariat released findings on the impacts of climate change on arctic ecosystems. One of the primary findings of their study was that the pack ice in the Arctic Ocean is and will continue to diminish as the earth warms. This will have dire consequences for polar bears and will severely limit their denning sites and feeding habitat, making it increasingly important to protect onshore habitat for polar bears to find refuge. The Arctic Refuge has the highest concentration of land-denning polar bears on Alaska's North Slope, and its protection is important to protect the conservation options for polar bears in the U.S.

Climate changes will also affect industry operating in arctic environments. Industry currently depends on frozen ground and ice roads for travel over the arctic tundra. The season for making ice roads is already shortening and will continue to erode. Coupled with the limited water availability on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, the development of ice roads to reduce industrial impact is unrealistic. As frozen ground thaws, existing infrastructure will need to be rebuilt and stabilized, and future buildings, roads, and pipelines will require new design elements to account for ongoing warming. It is likely that gravel roads and well pads will have to be employed which will permanently destroy and fragment habitat.

In 2003, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies of Science studied the cumulative environmental effects of oil and gas activities on Alaska's North slope. The NRC found higher than normal densities of predators, attracted by garbage and human food, which resulted in declines in bird populations; surface erosion and damage to tundra vegetation by off-road travel, particularly for seismic operations, that have persisted for decades; and centuries-long recovery of the effects of abandoned and unrestored infrastructure.

The Academy also found that the environmental effects of roads, well pads, pipelines and other infrastructure on the landscape, water systems, vegetation, and animals extend well beyond the "footprint", or physical area covered. This insight is especially important in light of recent U.S. Geological Survey and Energy Information Agency (EIA) estimates that the distribution of potential oil and gas of the Arctic Refuge is likely to be scattered in numerous discrete deposits across the coastal plain. This would require a large number of well pads, connected by pipelines, roads, airports, housing facilities, processing plants, and other infrastructure with effects that would radiate across the entire coastal plain. Other industrial operations, such as seismic exploration, water withdrawals, gravel mines, noise from operations, air pollution, and exploratory drilling would have effects over a much larger area. We reject any notion that development and its impacts could be isolated into a 2,000 acre portion of the refuge, as has been proposed for development by pro-drilling advocates.

The Interior Department predicted in 1987 that oil and gas exploration and development would have a major effect on water resources. This underscores another cumulative impact of industrial activity in the refuge. Fresh water is limited on the refuge's coastal plain, and direct damage to rivers and wetlands will adversely affect fish, waterfowl, muskox and other migratory birds.

Mr. President, in many of the ways that we have outlined above, oil exploration and development have already substantially changed the environments where they have occurred in Alaska's central Arctic. Since the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968, the NRC found that the North Slope oil fields, which sprawl across 1,000 square miles of Arctic habitats, have been transformed into one of the world's largest industrial complexes. Spills of toxic substances, contaminated waste, and other sources of pollution have chronically occurred, in spite of strict environmental regulations.

The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge encompasses 1.5 million acres of key wildlife habitat vital to the integrity of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We urge you, Mr. President, to permanently protect the biological diversity of the entire coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from future oil and gas exploration and development.

Thank you for considering our concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely*,

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cc: Members of Congress

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