

November 22, 2022

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
United States Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland,

I write to you today on behalf of the membership of the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat (Voice), regarding the Willow Project, a development project located on the ancestral homelands of the North Slope Iñupiat, and within the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (NPR-A).

Voice was established in 2015, in part to address and speak on issues important to Alaska’s North Slope Iñupiat. Our twenty-four-member board of directors is comprised of the city mayors, tribal leaders and Alaska Native village corporation (ANC) presidents from seven North Slope communities, as well as the heads of our regional tribe, Alaska Native corporation, borough government, tribal college, health care non-profit and school district. Over the past fifty years, our people have overcome significant challenges and obstacles to build many of the organizations that are the bedrock of our region’s story of indigenous self-determination.

For the North Slope Iñupiat, the Willow Project is a new opportunity to ensure our communities and our people have a viable future. If our region, our state and our nation are to fully realize Willow’s economic development and energy security benefits, now is the time to advance the approval process.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently completed its fifth comment period for Willow. This well-studied, well-thought-out project would provide critical economic benefits and long-term stability to the people of Alaska’s remote North Slope. In addition to more than \$6 billion of estimated federal and state revenue, Willow is expected to generate \$1.25 billion for the North Slope Borough (Borough) — funding that supports education, police and fire protection, law enforcement and other basic services.

Willow is also projected to add over \$2.5 billion to the NPR-A Impact Mitigation Grant Program, which allows for our communities within and near the NPR-A priority use of funding for projects that support long-term, public quality of life improvements, including social services support and youth programs. In the past decade, our communities have been awarded over \$65 million in grants through the Impact Mitigation Grant Program to aid in sustaining our Arctic communities.

Outside activist groups opposing Willow have drowned out local perspectives and are actively working to supersede the views of the Alaska Native people who live in proximity of the proposed project. We have grown tired of the relentless attacks on our people and communities by these outside organizations. We understand the complexity of the Willow Project — and know full well that moving ahead with Willow is in the best interests of our Iñupiaq communities.

The outside organizations that oppose the project want you to think jobs for locals will not be provided by the development of the Willow Project. This is simply not true. Willow will not only create new job

opportunities directly related to the project, but it will also create new revenue for the Borough through its ability to tax oil and gas infrastructure in our region. This revenue funds jobs and services in every community on the North Slope.

The Borough is the largest employer in the region. By opposing Willow, outside organizations are fighting against our Borough government's tax base and its ability to serve residents. Without this tax revenue, the Borough will not be able to continue funding basic services, will lay off employees and bring our communities to ruin. In addition to the jobs at the Borough, many Alaska Native village and regional corporations offer contract support services through the lifetime of development projects, creating more jobs.

One must ask: With what do the organizations that oppose Willow suggest we replace much-needed jobs and services if projects like Willow are not allowed to move forward? The unfortunate truth is that they do not have solutions to address the needs of our communities and our people, nor do they acknowledge that their push to stop Willow significantly deteriorates Iñupiat self-determination.

The very organizations that claim to care so much about the Arctic willfully ignore the needs of the people and communities on the North Slope. Even more, these organizations co-opt our ancestral homelands as a means to fundraise to stop projects that are the backbone of our regional economy. This is not environmental justice or any other kind of justice: It is a direct attack on Alaska Native self-determination.

Consultation is a right afforded to federally recognized tribes and ANCs. It is available as a means, partly, for indigenous communities to engage with the federal government on actions its proposing that could impact Tribal or ANC lands, water areas, and resources, among other things. Outside of the legal definition of consultation, the principle of consultation is often used as a synonym for open communication and or collaboration with indigenous communities and entities.

Consultation, both the legal definition and the principle, are frequently referenced when there are large scale projects on, or adjacent to, indigenous lands. Consultation, or the lack thereof, is also raised by many outside, non-indigenous organizations as a basis to oppose projects, claiming that the government has not properly consulted with indigenous communities before moving forward with a project.

If the principles of consultation, open communication and collaboration are foundational beliefs of so many of the organizations that oppose Willow, then one must ask another question: Have the organizations that so violently oppose Willow engaged in an iteration of consultation with our region's collective leadership to learn if we support or oppose the project before they began speaking out against it? The answer is a resounding NO.

Responsible resource development with the inclusion and meaningful engagement of North Slope Iñupiat has taken place for over fifty years and exemplifies a positive model of cultural, economic and ecological interdependence.

North Slope Iñupiat are a living example of a harmonious duality – perpetuating our millennia-old subsistence-based culture by making necessary adaptations to thrive in a modern world based on a cash economy. A modern world where access to cash is needed to support our subsistence practices. Understanding and embracing that interdependence is paramount to the future sustainability of the North Slope Iñupiat culture and traditions. We have always been good stewards and protectors of our

land and its many resources. To suggest that because we support responsible resource development means that we do not care about our ancestral homelands and our people is offensive. Anyone that believes this has bought into a false narrative pushed by outside groups that do not care about the North Slope Iñupiat or care to educate themselves on the challenges we have successfully overcome to sustain our people, our culture and our communities.

Willow has bipartisan support in Alaska. Governor Mike Dunleavy (R) has been a steadfast supporter of the project. Rep. Mary Peltola (D-AK), the first Alaska Native woman in Congress joined forces with Sens. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK) to advocate for the Iñupiat communities of the North Slope and all Alaskans, encouraging the BLM to approve Willow by the end of the year. Our region's leadership appreciates the continued advocacy by Alaska's elected officials on behalf of the North Slope Iñupiat.

Our region is ready for construction to start on Willow now. Economic opportunities on the North Slope are limited, making the prompt approval of this project invaluable to sustaining our livelihoods. Without these projects and their crucial economic benefits, many of our people would be forced to leave the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years and thereby extinguishing many of the important characteristics of Iñupiaq culture that define us.

With bipartisan endorsement, widespread support from the people living on the North Slope and real economic benefit for not only Alaska Native communities, but Alaskan residents in general, BLM must approve the Willow Project this year. We must move as quickly as possible — the livelihood of our people and the economic vitality of our communities depend on it. We appreciate your attention to the voices of our people on this project.

Sincerely,
Nagruk Harcharek



President
The Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat

cc: U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski, Alaska
U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan, Alaska
U.S. Representative Mary Peltola, Alaska
Governor Mike Dunleavy, Alaska
Tracy Stone-Manning, Director of Bureau of Land Management
Bryan Newland, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs
Tommy Beaudreau, U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior
Steve Cohn, Alaska Director
Stephanie Rice, Project Lead
Raina Thiele, Senior Advisor for Alaska Affairs and Strategic Priorities
PaaWee Rivera, Senior Advisor and Director of Tribal Affairs

