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BLM and FWS's Public Meeting on the Coastal Plain Draft SEIS Is No Way to Work With Alaska Native Communities

Washington's actions suggest the administration seeks to silence the North Slope Iñupiat

September 28, 2023, Utqiagvik, A.K. — On Monday evening, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) hastily convened a public meeting regarding the Coastal Plain Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) — just 19 days after a pair of surprise announcements by the Biden administration imposed major restrictions on the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) and canceled active leases within the Coastal Plain, the 1002 Area, of the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR).

The meeting proceeded despite multiple requests by North Slope tribal leaders and citizens to reschedule due to minimal notice of only two business days, community members participating in fall subsistence activities, and other previously scheduled community events happening at the same time. When VOICE members pressed why the public meeting went forward in the face of legitimate concerns by community members, the BLM and USFWS representatives shared that they wanted to honor their public notice and that reporters had planned their travel around the meeting. Ignoring the requests of indigenous peoples to accommodate the media amounts to a failure to partner with or honor Alaska Native people and their traditions. Only about seven community members attended the meeting given the short notice.

"This administration has made it a talking point to state that indigenous voices are heard, including on issues like respecting indigenous subsistence traditions and having a seat at the table through consistent communication and consultation. Then why were we given minimal notice for Monday's public meeting? I was personally hosting the community at a pre-arranged event and was not going to reschedule time with my constituents to accommodate the BLM and FWS schedules," said **North Slope Borough Mayor Harry Brower Jr.**

North Slope coastal villages, including Utqiagvik, where the public meeting occurred, and Kaktovik, the only community located within ANWR and the 1002 Area, are currently either actively whaling or preparing for their fall whaling season. If the administration truly values indigenous voices when

developing policies affecting their people and lands, then it must start by listening to their needs, including observing the timing of our subsistence traditions.

George Edwardson, President of the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, the regional Alaska Native tribal government for the North Slope, remarked during the meeting: “Our sovereignty says, we are supposed to be treated differently, don’t just step on us and run by and take off.”

Complicating the issue was the fact that BLM published the weighty Draft SEIS, over 1,400 pages long, only 12 days prior to the meeting — and in the midst of a three-month long broadband crisis on the North Slope that left an area the size of Minnesota with patchwork internet, mobile, and landline connectivity. Local service was restored only last week — six days before this meeting. That left our communities with neither sufficient access nor time to review the proposal and, as a result, were hard-pressed to offer meaningful feedback on the issue.

“A short unreasonable timeline to go through 1,400 pages was one of the reasons why we asked to reschedule,” said **Doreen Leavitt, Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope Council Secretary and Director of Natural Resources**. “And BLM did not honor our request to reschedule to later next month, a timeframe that would have taken into account our indigenous and traditional ways that we have practiced since time immemorial.”

“Going forward, we urge the administration to share information to help our communities better understand the decision-making process and when the administration will or will not consult our communities about policies affecting our people and lands,” said **City of Utqiagvik Mayor Asisaun Toovak**.

This public meeting came on the heels of a VOICE leadership trip to Washington, D.C. to share a message of partnership in the hope of strengthening the relationship between the North Slope and our nation’s capital. Yet the message we consistently receive back through one-sided actions — like the cancelling of leases in ANWR and scheduling public meetings at inopportune times for our community members — is that our voices do not matter, and that we are on the bottom of the federal government’s list in terms of communication, consultation, and partnership. This lack of respect has been exemplified by the Secretary of Interior’s refusal to meet with North Slope leadership at least six times in Washington D.C.

“VOICE was *just* in Washington to testify before Congress on the lack of communication and consultation by DOI surrounding the announcement canceling the ANWR leases and locking up over half of NPR-A. Even so, I ended my testimony by extending a hand of partnership on behalf the Iñupiat of the North Slope, in hopes for a better future. Disappointingly, less than a week later, BLM and USFWS held a public meeting on the very same issue of my testimony, with the very same disregard for the tribes, community members, and tribal leadership as earlier this month with the ANWR and NPR-A announcement. I once again will reiterate that we *can and must* partner to create a better future for the next generations,” said **Nagruk Harcharek, President of Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat**.

The BLM and FWS's latest actions demonstrate a need for significant improvement from DOI and its agencies to build a more respectful and effective partnership between the North Slope Iñupiat and policymakers in Washington and Alaska.

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About Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat

[Voice of Arctic Iñupiat](#) ("VOICE") is a nonprofit organization established in 2015 by the region's collective elected Iñupiat leadership to speak with a unified voice on issues impacting the North Slope Iñupiat, their communities, their economy, and their culture. Its members include local governments, Alaska Native Corporations, federally recognized tribes, and tribal non-profits across the North Slope of Alaska. In 2017, VOICE's board passed a resolution in support of opening of the 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil and gas exploration and development.

Timeline of events:

- **June 11:** Fiber optic telecommunications line was severed, impacting telephone and internet connectivity across the North Slope region, including the ability to open or download documents.
- **Sept. 6:** DOI announced it would be canceling the leases in the 1002 Area of ANWR.
 - North Slope leadership learned of the announcement in the news.
 - The first fall whale was landed in Kaktovik, the only community located in ANWR.
- **Sept. 8:** The Coastal Plain Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and accompanying materials were made available online. The documents total more than 1,400 pages.
- **Sept. 18:** BLM posted the public meeting schedule with the Utqiagvik date TBD.
- **Sept. 19:** Telephone and internet services were restored to previous capacity on the North Slope.
- **Sept. 20:** The public meeting notice, with date and time, was shared with **some** entities in the region.
- **Sept 21:** North Slope leadership met with DOI representatives in Washington, D.C. to discuss the surprise announcement on Sept. 6.
- **Sept. 21-23:** Multiple local and regional entities requested the Utqiagvik public meeting on the Coastal Plain Draft SEIS be rescheduled. BLM once again ignored the wishes of local and regional leadership.
- **Sept. 25:** BLM and FWS hold public meeting, kept according to schedule because of planned travel by the media to cover the proceedings.