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VOICE Takes Advocacy for North Slope Land Rights to Capitol Hill

VOICE President Nagruk Harcharek testifies before U.S. House that the federal government continues to act 'with little to no regard for the voices of our people.'

September 19, 2023, Washington D.C. — [Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat](#) (VOICE) President Nagruk Harcharek [testified today](#) before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources – Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, advocating for Alaska Native communities to be included in all policy decisions that affect North Slope people. This hearing comes less than two weeks after the Biden administration abruptly cancelled leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and issued new land management regulations for the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A), without consulting the Iñupiat who have lived on these lands for millennia – and against their wishes.

During his testimony, Harcharek laid out the federal government's historic disregard for the rights and voices of the North Slope Iñupiat beginning with the Alaska Purchase in 1867. "We are integral to the Arctic ecosystem, as ubiquitous as the caribou, polar bears, birds, berries, and fish. Yet, when Washington takes action in the Arctic – our people are an afterthought," said Harcharek.

Detailing the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA), Harcharek said that before its passage the federal government sought to appropriate 75% of their land without just compensation. The Iñupiat were the only Alaska Native group to oppose the law. Yet the discovery of commercial quantities of oil on Iñupiat lands in 1969 led to ANCSA's swift passage within three years. Oil, not justice for Alaska Native communities, drove the law's passage.

Harcharek noted that not much has changed since then. "Fifty-two years after ANCSA, the federal government continues to make decisions about our ancestral homelands – now in the name of environmental justice – with little to no regard for the voices of our people. There is no justice in this approach," he said.

In response to Harcharek's testimony, Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Pete Stauber (R-Minn.) stated: "Mr. Harcharek, as long as I am chair of this committee...your community will be represented. It pains me to hear you say that this administration never consulted with your eight communities on the North Slope over this disastrous decision. I want to commit to you and your people that we will

build a relationship.”

Under the management of the North Slope Borough, resource development is a critical part of the North Slope’s economy and Iñupiat self-determination. These projects provide employment opportunities and funds for essential services like modern water and sewer systems, waste collection, search and rescue, wildlife research, planning and community development, education, and road construction and maintenance. Thanks to responsible resource development projects in the region, the North Slope is able to provide for its people and communities with little to no help from the state and federal government.

Harcharek ultimately invited members of the committee to the North Slope to meet the Iñupiat and see the lands affected by Washington’s policies. Reiterating VOICE’s mission to create unity and cooperation, he proposed to build a stronger partnership between Washington and the North Slope that respects the rights and self-determination of Alaska Native communities. “We refuse to fall victim to policies made thousands of miles away and will always fight for our self-determination. But it does not have to be a fight. Together, we can right historic wrongs, create responsible resource development projects in our region, and fully realize Iñupiat self-determination.”

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About Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat

Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat was formed in 2015 as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit corporation, creating a communication network amongst Arctic Slope communities to establish a unified voice for our region and people. Today, our twenty-four member organizations work together to ensure that our collective voice is heard and respected – locally, regionally and nationally.