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North Slope Indigenous Elected Leaders Meet with Secretary Haaland After Years of Denials and Ignored Requests; Press Department of Interior for Commitments on Engagement and Mandates Affecting Their Ancestral Homelands

Secretary Haaland's Decision to Meet North Slope Indigenous Leaders Comes After Years of Stonewalling Tactics

WASHINGTON, DC – After years of stonewalling the North Slope Iñupiat by declining or ignoring at least eight meeting requests, Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretary Deb Haaland met today with the region's Indigenous elected leadership to discuss the federal government's [unprecedented mandates](#) affecting their ancestral homelands, including the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) and Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The meeting follows DOI's decision to finalize the NPR-A Rule, despite unanimous consensus of opposition by local Indigenous communities and precedes the Department's forthcoming issuance of an unnecessary supplemental environmental impact study (SEIS) for ANWR.

Elected Iñupiaq leaders have visited Washington, D.C. on multiple occasions to highlight how the federal government's actions will impact the North Slope Iñupiat's economy, communities, and culture. Today, a collective of North Slope leaders pressed Sec. Haaland for a series of commitments:

- A commitment from the Secretary and DOI to send formal notices of consultation through multiple means, including mail and e-mail, to North Slope Indigenous designees moving forward – a request that had been made previously to Department staff, but not honored.
- A commitment from the Secretary and DOI that North Slope leadership be part of the development of policies affecting their ancestral homelands and be alerted to decisions and announcements before leaks to the press or outside organizations.
- A commitment to an in-person follow-up meeting with Sec. Haaland before the end of the year. Additionally, North Slope leaders requested the Secretary's assistance in securing a meeting with Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy John Podesta given his weight on decisions impacting policies affecting Iñupiat homelands coming out of the Biden administration.
- A commitment from DOI to reconduct the economic analysis of the NPR-A rule, which omitted consideration of the economic ramifications of the rule on North Slope communities.
- A commitment from DOI to year-round subsistence access rights for the Kaktovikmiut on their ancestral homelands, which are currently managed by the federal government.
- A commitment from Sec. Haaland to protect subsistence rights over conservation, just as DOI has made claims to protect subsistence rights and access over development.

- The Secretary's support in eliminating dangerous and offensive tropes about the North Slope Iñupiat by Members of Congress, the administration, and outside organizations, which have a direct, negative impact on Iñupiaq self-determination.

After declining and delaying meetings with North Slope leaders for years and the Department's decision to advance policies that were crafted without local Indigenous input, DOI cannot credibly claim after the fact that it is taking steps to consult with the region's elected leadership.

"Despite today's meeting, we acknowledge the sadness present in our communities, because Sec. Haaland and DOI have chosen to ignore our voices, only choosing to meet us after advancing unilateral policies that will have serious long-term impacts for our communities and culture," said [Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat Program and Government Affairs Manager Kate Wolgemuth](#). "We are not political footballs for the federal government, and we look forward to DOI's swift response to the commitments we relayed directly to the Secretary."

"It is inconceivable that Secretary Haaland would wait so long to meet directly with Indigenous leaders whom she claims to support," said [Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope Director of Natural Resources and Tribal Secretary Doreen Leavitt](#). "By waiting until the eleventh hour to speak with our leadership, she has revealed how little this administration cares for the opinions of Indigenous communities in the policymaking process."

DOI's inadequate approach to engagement with North Slope leadership and communities exemplifies the tone-deaf, lopsided relationship between the North Slope Iñupiat and Secretary Haaland. Her repeated refusals defy White House and DOI [policy memorandums](#) about tribal consultation and should raise substantial concerns about the Secretary's engagement – or lack thereof – with other Indigenous communities when crafting rules that affect their lands and people.

"The North Slope has been steadfast in its opposition to DOI's unprecedented actions in our ancestral homelands, a fact that would have been made clear to Secretary Haaland had she met with our region's elected leadership on the numerous occasions requested," said [North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management Deputy Director Nicole Wojciehowski](#). "Today's meeting felt like an afterthought to the Dept's process, underscoring DOI's flawed approach to Indigenous lands and people."

"The federal government's 'community engagement process' was seemingly organized to prevent us from providing input on their disastrous policies," said [Native Village of Barrow Executive Director Fannie Suvlu](#). "After the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) scheduled a public hearing to discuss the proposed NPR-A rule in the midst of our whole-of-community fall subsistence activities and declined multiple requests by local leaders to reschedule for greater community participation, it became apparent that Washington cared little for our opinions or how their actions would impact the North Slope Iñupiat."

"Over the past 10 months, the federal government let their concerns drive the policymaking process, not those of our Indigenous communities," said [Utqiagvik City Councilmember Martina Hopson](#). "During BLM's sole community meeting in Utqiagvik, staff openly admitted that avoiding the Congressional Review Act, not our legitimate and very serious concerns about these policies' impact on our lands and culture, was the primary force shaping the federal government's community engagement strategy."

Had the department followed the law and their own internal processes by including local elected Indigenous leadership in the policymaking process, it would understand the significant unintended economic consequences of its misguided NPR-A and ANWR policies. Combined, these policies will restrict over 32 million acres of the North Slope Iñupiat's ancestral homelands and foreclose on future

economic, access, and subsistence opportunities for local communities, including Kaktovik, the only community located within ANWR's 19 million acres.

“Make no mistake, the federal government's decisions affecting our ancestral homelands in NPR-A and ANWR will impose serious economic consequences on our communities,” said [Ukpeaġvik Iñupiat Corporation](#) **Board of Director Vice President Delbert Rexford**. “It defies logic that the federal government, nearly 50 years after imposing the economic model that the North Slope Iñupiat depend on today, now seeks to hobble our regional economy without providing alternatives for our communities.”

“DOI has failed to recognize Kaktovik's rightful place as the only community and Indigenous people within the boundary of ANWR,” said **Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation President Charles Lampe**. “We hope to build on today's meeting to correct flawed policies and decisions coming out of the Dept. that would have a detrimental impact on our ancestral homeland and subsistence traditions. We request more frequent and meaningful consultation with the DOI regarding decisions that affect our community and people as a whole.”

Proposed DOI actions would imperil the North Slope's economy. Today, 95% of the North Slope Borough's tax revenue comes from the authority to tax industry's property and infrastructure. Through that tax revenue, the Borough is able to build schools, roads, hospitals and health clinics, provide local police and fire protection, and fund a wildlife department that conducts research to support local subsistence. It is through these services provided to our communities and people that the Borough is the largest employer on the North Slope today.

“Thanks to the taxation of infrastructure in our region and the essential services supported by these funds, the North Slope Iñupiat's average lifespan has more than doubled since 1969,” said [Nunamiut Corporation](#) **President and Director William Paneak**. “Washington's actions will roll back this progress, strip us of our right to economic opportunity, and make us refugees in our own homelands.”

“The decisions made by the federal government in Washington have consequences for communities on the North Slope, including my hometown of Wainwright,” said [Olgoonik Corporation](#) **CEO Hugh Patkotak, Sr.** “Make no mistake, these will impact all areas of our lives, including our economic prosperity, and ability to practice our subsistence traditions.”

The U.S. House of Representative's recent vote on the bipartisan HR 6285, or the “Alaska's Right to Produce Act,” demonstrates that Congress is alert to the injustices imposed on Indigenous communities by the federal government's unilateral actions. It also underscores widespread support for North Slope Iñupiat self-determination in their ancestral homelands.

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[About Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat](#)

VOICE is a nonprofit organization established in 2015 by the region's collective elected Iñupiat leadership and is dedicated to preserving and advancing North Slope Iñupiat cultural and economic self-determination. Its members include local governments, Alaska Native Corporations, federally recognized tribes, and tribal non-profits across the North Slope of Alaska. VOICE's Board of Directors previously issued a resolution in opposition to the federal government's Proposed Rule affecting the North Slope Iñupiat's ancestral homelands in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A).