

**World Wildlife Fund US Arctic Program**

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December 15, 2020

**Submitted via e-mail**

Chad Padgett  
State Director  
Alaska State Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
222 West 7th Ave., Stop #13  
Anchorage, Alaska 99513-7504

**Re: Comments: Call for Nominations and Comments for the Coastal Plain Alaska Oil and Gas Lease Sale, 85 Fed. Reg. 73292 (Nov. 17, 2020)**

Dear Mr. Padgett,

On behalf of World Wildlife Fund (WWF), I submit the following comments in response to the public notice for the Call for Nominations and Comments for the Coastal Plain Alaska Oil and Gas Lease Sale, 85 Fed. Reg. 73292 (Nov. 17, 2020). Unfortunately, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has undertaken a flawed and deficient process that essentially ignores public input and fails to comply with federal law. Therefore, until these serious shortcomings are fully addressed, BLM must withdraw its notice of lease sale.

WWF's mission is to conserve nature and reduce the most pressing threats to the diversity of life on Earth. For nearly 60 years, WWF has worked to help people and nature thrive. WWF is supported by 1.2 million members in the United States. In its work, WWF has identified the Arctic as a place of global priority. Since 1992, WWF has dedicated a program specifically to Arctic conservation, the goal of which is to ensure that the biodiversity and natural resources of the Arctic are protected and well managed, and that Arctic ecosystems remain resilient and continue to support viable populations of species and benefit the well-being of people who depend on them for their livelihoods and culture.

As you know, polar bears are listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) and depleted under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Two of the world's 19 subpopulations of polar bears occur in the U.S. (Alaska) – one in the Chukchi Sea (shared with the Russian Federation), and the other in Southern Beaufort Sea (shared with Canada).

WWF's long-term vision for polar bears is that, by 2050, viable populations roam freely across their available range, maintaining their ecological and cultural importance for the Arctic and Arctic peoples. For the past 40 years, WWF has worked to deliver on this vision of polar bear conservation by relying on science, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and collaboration with a wide variety of local, regional, federal, Tribal, and multilateral entities. One of the program's areas of work concerns the Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation of polar bears - one of the world's most vulnerable polar bear

subpopulations. The status of this subpopulation is clearly linked to the most serious threat to polar bears throughout their range: continued loss of their sea ice habitat due to climate change.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Due to global warming-induced sea ice loss, the Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear subpopulation declined significantly (25-50 percent) between 2003-2006, having dropped from approximately 1,800 bears in 1986 to 907 (95% CI = 548 – 1,270) bears in 2010.<sup>4,5</sup> Poor survival of cubs during their first year of life as well as subadult survival has been identified as a major contributor to this decline. Atwood et al. (2020) confirmed this significant drop in population levels for the US portion of the SBS population from 1,300 bears in 2003 to 573 bears (95% CI = 232-1,140) in 2015, with an average of 565 (95% CI 340-920) maintained over the period 2006 to 2015, indicating that the population remained stable at this lower level during this time.<sup>6</sup>

As sea ice in the region has diminished, female polar bears have shifted away from making dens on unstable pack ice to denning onshore.<sup>7</sup> Two new publications by Wilson and Durner (2020)<sup>8</sup> and Atwood et al. (2020)<sup>9</sup> confirmed earlier research by Fischbach et. al. (2007)<sup>10</sup> that over 60% of all Southern Beaufort Sea breeding females den on land, which represents a 50-percent increase in the frequency of land-based denning since the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> With the continued retreat of sea ice, land-based denning habitat will become even more crucial for the survival of the Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation. This movement by female polar bears to den on land is clearly connected to a particular region, selected because of landscape features that favor den construction. Today the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Arctic Refuge), which is also known as the 1002 Area, has one of the highest densities of suitable denning habitat for pregnant female polar bears in northern Alaska.<sup>12,13</sup> About one-third of all breeding female polar bears in the Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation are now using the Coastal Plain

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<sup>1</sup> Atwood T.C., Peacock, E.L., McKinney, M.A., Lillie, K., Wilson, R.R., Douglas, D.C., Terletzky, P., and Miller, S., 2016. Rapid environmental change drives increased land use by an Arctic marine predator: PLoS ONE, v. 11, p. e0155932.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019, Technical summary, in Pörtner, H.-O., Roberts, D.C., Masson-Delmotte, V., Zhai, P., Tignor, M., Poloczanska, E., Mintenbeck, K., Alegría, A., Nicolai, M., Okem, A., Petzold, J., Rama, B., and Weyer, N.M., eds., Special report on the ocean and cryosphere in a changing climate: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, p. 39–69, and p. 203-320, accessed October 28, 2020, at <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>.

<sup>3</sup> Atwood, T.C., Bromaghin, J.F., Patil, V.P., Durner, G.M., Douglas, D.C., and Simac, K.S., 2020. Analyses on subpopulation abundance and annual number of maternal dens for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1087, 16 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201087>

<sup>4</sup> Bromaghin J, Amstrup S, McDonald T, Stirling I, Derocher A, Richardson E, Regehr E, Douglas D, Durner G, and Atwood TC. 2015. Polar bears in the Beaufort Sea: population decline and stabilization in the 2000's. Ecological Applications 25:634-651.

<sup>5</sup> Amstrup, S. C., Stirling, I. and Lentfer, J. W. (1986) Past and present status of polar bears in Alaska. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 14, 241-254.

<sup>6</sup> Atwood, T.C., Bromaghin, J.F., Patil, V.P., Durner, G.M., Douglas, D.C., and Simac, K.S., 2020, Analyses on subpopulation abundance and annual number of maternal dens for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1087, 16 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201087>.

<sup>7</sup> Rode, K.D., Olson, J., Eggett, D., Douglas, D.C., Durner, G.M., Atwood, T.C., Wilson, R.R., Smith, T.S., and St. Martin, M., 2018, Den phenology and reproductive success of polar bears in a changing climate: *Journal of Mammalogy*, v. 99, p. 16–26.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, R.R., and Durner, G.M., 2020, Seismic survey design and effects on maternal polar bear dens: *Journal of Wildlife Management*, v. 84, p. 201–212.

<sup>9</sup> Atwood, T.C., Bromaghin, J.F., Patil, V.P., Durner, G.M., Douglas, D.C., and Simac, K.S., 2020, Analyses on subpopulation abundance and annual number of maternal dens for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1087, 16 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201087>.

<sup>10</sup> Fischbach, A.S., Amstrup, S.C., and Douglas, D.C., 2007. Landward and eastward shift of Alaskan polar bear denning associated with recent sea ice changes: *Polar Biology*, v. 30, p. 1395–1405.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, R.R., and Durner, G.M., 2020, Seismic survey design and effects on maternal polar bear dens: *Journal of Wildlife Management*, v. 84, p. 201–212.

<sup>12</sup> Atwood, T.C., Bromaghin, J.F., Patil, V.P., Durner, G.M., Douglas, D.C., and Simac, K.S., 2020. Analyses on subpopulation abundance and annual number of maternal dens for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1087, 16 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201087>.

<sup>13</sup> Durner, G.M., Amstrup, S.C., Ambrosius, K.J (2006) Polar bear maternal den habitat in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. *Arctic*, 31-36.

for denning.<sup>14,15</sup> Here, they give birth to and raise newborn cubs in the necessary shelter and safety of dens, before emerging in March-April.<sup>16</sup> The Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain is therefore a tremendously important nursery area for mothers and newborn cubs and for the entire Southern Beaufort Sea subpopulation. The majority of the Coastal Plain (approximately 77 percent) is designated as critical habitat under the ESA for the species.<sup>17</sup> Proposed exploration and development associated with oil and gas drilling on or near these denning areas would pose a severe threat to the survival of this population. For these reasons, we strongly oppose any efforts to hold an oil and gas lease sale on the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

WWF previously provided detailed comments which outlined many issues that BLM failed to sufficiently address in its draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Coastal Plain leasing program. For instance, the draft EIS failed to include key information and analysis on the effects of climate change on polar bears, failed to analyze a reasonable range of alternatives and protective mitigation measures, and failed to take an adequate look at the impacts that industry activity would have on the Arctic ecosystem of the Coastal Plain. Further, the draft EIS failed to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. None withstanding these serious deficiencies, BLM did not sufficiently address these issues in its final EIS and then adopted the most aggressive, least protective leasing program option, opening the entire Coastal Plain to oil and gas activities, in its Record of Decision (ROD).

It is deeply concerning to see the Administration swiftly move to prioritize a lease sale. We especially find BLM's announcement of a lease sale on January 6 troubling, considering that the call for nominations comment period is still ongoing through December 17. As published, BLM will begin accepting bids December 21 through 31. This means that BLM will have only a single business day to analyze all public comments from the call for nominations. This is an inadequate time frame and yet another example of how the Administration has avoided fact-finding and meaningful public engagement processes on a matter of deep importance to the nation.

To be clear, WWF supports permanent protection of the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil and gas activities. WWF takes this position because of potential irreversible impacts of such activities on polar bears, as well as for the broader risk to the natural and human values for which the Refuge was established. In addition, the impacts of global climate change, which are already altering Arctic ecosystems, will only be exacerbated by BLM's proposed activities.

WWF finds this rushed process by BLM to be irresponsible and fundamentally deficient. The draft EIS was not thorough, lacked key information and analysis, and did not comply with numerous federal laws. The inadequate EIS led to a Record of Decision that has opened 1.5 million acres of the Coastal Plain to oil and gas activities. BLM must conduct additional analyses of the impacts of the lease sale before moving forward with any leases and should withdraw its notice of lease sale until the comment period for the call for nominations is over.

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<sup>14</sup>Amstrup, S. C., G. York, T. L. McDonald, R. Nielson, and K. Simac (2004) Detecting denning polar bears with forward looking infra-red (FLIR) imagery. *BioScience* 54, 337-344.

<sup>15</sup>Atwood, T.C., Bromaghin, J.F., Patil, V.P., Durner, G.M., Douglas, D.C., and Simac, K.S., 2020. Analyses on subpopulation abundance and annual number of maternal dens for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1087, 16 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201087>.

<sup>16</sup>Amstrup, S. C., and C. Gardner (1994) Polar bear maternity denning in the Beaufort Sea. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 58, 1–10.

75 Fed. Reg. 76086 (Dec. 7, 2010).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mgt D. Williams', with a stylized, cursive script.

Margaret Williams  
Director  
WWF U.S. Arctic Program