



Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives

August 19, 2004

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
CHAIRMAN, FISHERIES CONSERVATION,  
WILDLIFE AND OCEANS  
NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION  
AND PUBLIC LANDS  
RECEIVED  
CHAIRMAN, CHESAPEAKE BAY  
WATERSHED TASK FORCE

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OFFICE OF THE  
EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT

The Honorable Gale Norton  
Department of Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Norton:

1 Having reviewed the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) June 2004 draft amended Northeast Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (IAP/EIS) for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), I strongly support Alternative A, the "No Action" alternative, to sustain existing environmental and wildlife protection in the area, especially in the critical and fragile Teshekpuk Lake region. This alternative represents the current management of the area, established in the 1998 Record of Decision for the area. I am unaware of any new science indicating that the sensitive areas now closed to leasing, as proposed in Alternatives B and C, can be opened without negatively impacting wildlife and native Alaskan communities.

2 The agency's preferred alternative (Alternative B) reduces existing protections for the Teshekpuk Lake area by 75 percent. The 213,000 acre "No Lease Zone" proposed is too small to protect molting geese and waterfowl and caribou that seek refuge there. Tens of thousands of geese, including brant, greater white-fronted goose, Canada goose and snow goose, molt in this area. During this flightless time, the geese are very sensitive to disturbance. There are also many nesting birds in this area, such as the threatened spectacled eider, yellow-billed loons, and buff-breasted sandpipers.

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Wildlife The National Academy of Sciences, in its 2003 report, *Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope*, specifically identified increasing pressure from predators (e.g., gulls, ravens, and fox) on certain nesting bird populations, and reported predation is outpacing reproductive rates for some species. Predators are increasing in oil fields on the North Slope in response to availability of food from humans. Further impacts on bird populations include noise from seismic exploration, which has displaced migrating birds. In 1998, the Pacific Flyway Council, consisting of waterfowl biologists and wildlife managers from state and provincial wildlife agencies, recommended that the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area not be opened to oil and gas leasing to protect molting geese and further be given permanent protection from development by Secretarial designation. Ever since then, impacts of drilling have accumulated, as reported in the 2003 National Academy report.

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Caribou Further, the preferred alternative would diminish protection for the caribou by opening up part of their critical calving and insect relief areas. Most of the concentrated calving area and insect relief area would now be open to leasing and industrial development in contrast to the 1998 plan, which protects most of the concentrated calving area. The National Academy of Sciences reports that,



between, 1998 and 2001, reproductive success for female caribou contending with industry activities and high insect populations during calving season was less than for undisturbed females, contributing to an overall population reduction. According to data from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, analyzed by the National Audubon Society, 88 percent of the Teshekpuk Lake herd's concentrated calving area would be at risk under BLM's preferred alternative. Additionally, only 41 percent of insect-relief habitat would be protected from leasing and industrial development

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The Alaskan natives of Nuiqsut and Barrow rely on the caribou from the Teshekpuk Lake herd for their survival. The residents of Nuiqsut already have to travel further and further to find caribou due to the encroaching oil and gas development near their village. The longer they have to travel, the more time they are away from their families and jobs. In addition, they are more exposed to the elements and risks of health threats from spoiled meat. If more development is allowed, these problems will only continue to get worse and further impact the Inupiat way of life.

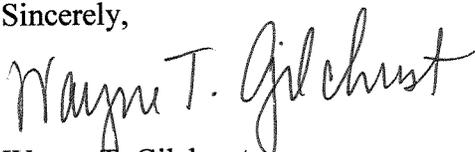
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I understand industry is studying all areas on federal lands under lease for potential development, but a recent Associated Press review of BLM records showed about 2/3 of these lands have never been explored. Given this information, I do not support an increase in lands available for lease in the NPR-A at the expense of other, irreplaceable natural resources valuable to the nation. I understand that the opening of additional lands for development of natural gas could increase economic feasibility of a natural gas pipeline from Alaska to the lower 48 states, but am concerned that Alternatives B and C do not achieve the necessary balance between protection of important living resources and human communities and our nation's energy future.

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The National Academy of Sciences reports that cumulative environmental damage will continue to grow as more development is allowed in this fragile landscape and that, "...if wise decisions are to be made, the nature and extent of undesirable effects likely to accompany future activities must be fully acknowledged and incorporated into regulatory strategies and decision-making." We must fully weigh the benefits and costs of such policy, and, given the current information available on both potential impacts to wildlife and the remaining North Slope ecosystem and the potential this area has for alleviating our energy crisis, I believe we must not risk permanent damage to a fragile and productive ecosystem for a limited amount of oil and gas. Again, I urge you to choose Alternative A, the "No Action" alternative.

Sincerely,



Wayne T. Gilchrest  
Member of Congress