Statement of Sam Alexander, Gwich'in,
to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources hearing "The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain" on H.R. 1146, The Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act

March 26, 2019

Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar, members of the Subcommittee, and Chief Swan of the Piscataway Conoy people, *Mahsi' Choo* for the opportunity to speak to you in favor of the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act, H.R. 1146.

Drin gwinzii, Shoozhri' Sam Alexander oozhii, Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ihłįį, gaa Tanan gwihch'ii. Shiyeghan naįį Clarence ts'a' Ginny Alexander gaavoozhri', Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ginlįį.

Good afternoon, my name is Sam Alexander, I am from Fort Yukon, Alaska, but I live in Fairbanks, Alaska. My parents are Clarence and Ginny Alexander from Fort Yukon.

Today I am here to talk with you about why my people, the Gwich'in Nation continue to fight to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

As a prior US Army Special Forces Officer and graduate of Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, my people have asked me to speak because of my familiarity with the Western society.

So why are we here? Why do we fight so hard to protect this land? The word Gwich'in means people of a place. And the refuge is one of the places we are from, long before it was a refuge, long before the United States existed. The refuge is very close to my heart, as it the reason for my own existence. My grandmother was orphaned by diseases that wiped out her family in the early 20th century, diseases that ravaged our people and brought us to the brink of extinction. She was able to survive because she left her home and went to live on the land that later became the Refuge. There, the land and animals provided for her.

How do we repay the land for all that it has given us? As Gwich'in we are bound by tradition to be stewards of the land, for it has provided us so much.

In our traditional way, animals and the land are revered and treated with the utmost respect. Our traditional protocol says that even the smallest of animals are not to be taken advantage of or disrespected. When you take a resource from the land you are supposed to leave something in return. For example, mice often store food. They hide small piles of wild Indian potato for a later date when they'll need it. Food can be scarce, at times in the Arctic. A Gwich'in person may help himself to the mice's food, but he knows, in exchange he must leave something of value for the mouse. Our values say

that just because you are human that you are not above the other creations. In our way, the mice are no less worthy of respect than you or I.

Stewardship of the land is a sacred duty, and as such, one that cannot be entrusted to corporations, even if they have the words native in front of them.

Beyond our duty to be stewards of this land lays another powerful motivator. We protect this land because our connection to the land is the basis for our culture. What we eat, what we wear, what we talk about, the words that we use, our sense of time and space all come from our connection to the land. Our connection with the caribou and all creatures of the land sustain our language. How we communicate the detailed directions needed to survive on the land go beyond general terms such as north or south, but instead incorporate the features of the land, such as traveling up river, oonji', or down the river, oodi'. Our concept of time is based on the land's natural cycles. For example, we call the month of May *Gwiluu Zhrii*, which means "The Month of Crusted Snow". Of course, with climate change, we have started to see the crusted snow for which May is named in April. Our language contains knowledge of the land from time immemorial, and that knowledge is best understood in the language.

And yet we are at an inflection point with our language. We have fewer and fewer speakers every year, and knowledge is being lost. This loss is being recognized. The United Nations has declared this the year of indigenous languages. These languages are recognized for the value that they bring to our understanding of the world. But beyond the accumulated knowledge and insight the Gwich'in language provides, it gives something more. *Diiginjik*, our language, gives the Gwich'in people a connection to each other and our ancestors. We have place names that inform us and guide us. Place names that have existed for millenia. My father is from a place called *Shoo*, which means happy, and you can see the light in his eyes when he speaks of this place. And so what do we want? We want what people have always wanted, to live in a place we love, living the way we want with the people that we love and cherish.

I've heard it said that there can be balanced development, but I think I must not understand what balanced means, because so much of the north slope of Alaska is already open to development. How is opening the remainder creating balance?
The animals are already under stress now. Climate change is impacting our lives now. As the temperatures stay near the freeze-thaw point we are seeing more rain and wet weather. This is making one of the mainstays of the caribou diet, lichen, inaccessible as it is buried under ice instead of snow. Environmental stresses like this make protection of the calving grounds all that more important, as the caribou are facing the unprecedented stress of rapid climate change. And it is not just the caribou, but the fish and other animals as well. Drilling the refuge will exacerbate these changes.

How do we know that activity in the refuge will impact animal behavior? Our traditional knowledge informs us. Once I was moose hunting with my father, an esteemed elder. We were traveling along and saw a bear in the distance. He raised his rifle as if he was he was going to shoot it and then stopped. He put his rifle down and said we should

keep going. I asked him why? And he replied, “bears are always in front of moose”. And I thought, well what does that mean?! He must be tired, because he wasn’t making any sense to me. Well we went around the corner and sure enough, there was a Bull Moose. How could he know this? He knows this because he has spent a lot of time on the land, and a lot of time learning from elders our traditional knowledge. That is hard fought knowledge, and has to be very accurate in order for it to be of use. Our traditional knowledge helps us understand the behavior of animals in ways that western science is only beginning to grasp. And this knowledge tells us that oil and gas development in birthing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou will devastate the herd.

I asked my father what message he thought you needed to hear. He said, without the caribou, our tribe dies. He didn’t say, without more oil drilling our tribe dies. He didn’t say without greater infrastructure and development of the land our tribe dies. He said without caribou. The caribou bring life to the land. Without caribou the refuge dies. And not just in *iizhik gwats’an gwandaii goodlit*, not just the calving grounds on the coastal plain, we are talking about the entire refuge. So a choice must be made, and I hope you make the right one. Please pass this important piece of legislation.

Mahsi’ choo for your time. De Oppresso Liber.

Sam Alexander
Gwich’in