

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

Brian Steed
Deputy Director, Policy and Programs
Bureau of Land Management
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

January 17, 2019

Dear Deputy Director Steed:

We write to express serious concerns with the Bureau of Land Management's notice of intent to revise the Integrated Activity Plan (IAP) for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve), the largest contiguous unit of public land left in our country.¹ Revising the IAP barely six years after it was completed is entirely unnecessary, and appears to be driven by the desire to hand over even more of America's public lands to oil companies, while ignoring the impacts that would have to the world's climate, Alaska's indigenous populations, and the clean air, lands, and waters that sustain some of the most extraordinary fish and wildlife populations left in North America.

Our concerns are rooted in what top Trump Administration officials have said to date about why a revision of the IAP is necessary. On multiple occasions, Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Joe Balash made it clear that the purpose of revising the IAP is to open "millions more acres," including additional lands around Teshekpuk Lake, to oil and gas leasing.² Instead of charting a thoughtful management direction for America's largest swath of untouched lands, Assistant Secretary Balash informed the public that they'd be partaking in a process *designed* with a particular outcome in mind. This is not the way that sound public land management decisions are crafted, nor is it a way to let the American people know that their voices will be heard.

This is in stark contrast to the development of the 2013 IAP—the first-ever IAP developed for the entire Reserve—which took a comprehensive approach to managing the spectacular wildlife

¹ Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Notice of Intent to Prepare an Integrated Activity Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, 83 Fed. Reg. 58,785 (Nov. 21, 2018).

² Shady Grove Oliver, *The Arctic Sounder, Teshekpuk drilling in focus ahead of NPR-A plan revisions* (Nov. 23, 2018); see also E. Harball, Alaska Public Media, *Interior official: 'millions' more acres in NPR-A to open for development* (Aug. 9, 2018).

and habitat of the area, while ensuring subsistence resources were protected. That plan was crafted around a robust public process, scientific understanding, and careful consideration of a variety of interests. The result was an IAP that protects key, irreplaceable areas for people today and for generations that will follow, while still allowing oil and gas development on 11.8 million acres. While the 2013 IAP did not prohibit oil and gas activities in all areas that are worthy of protections, it did succeed in protecting many biologically-rich lands and their surface values. It was adopted after a robust public process that included extensive public input and tribal consultation, consisting of 17 public meetings and review of over 500,000. Given the broad process and scientific study that went into the recently-adopted 2013 IAP, we are deeply concerned that Interior appears committed to eliminating protections and opening additional areas to oil and gas leasing.

The Reserve has outstanding conservation and subsistence values. It provides key habitat to the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk Lake Caribou Herds, which are vital subsistence resources for over 40 communities in northern and western Alaska. Millions of migratory seabirds, shorebirds, waterfowl, and raptors rely on the Reserve for habitat throughout the year, including at key life-stages. Many mammals like wolves, grizzly bears, moose, and wolverine also call it home. Marine mammals such as polar bears, walrus, beluga whales, and spotted seals utilize its rich coastal and lagoon waters.

Because of these exceptional values, Congress has mandated that BLM manage the Reserve not just for oil and gas, but also to ensure “maximum protection” of areas that have “significant subsistence, recreational, fish, and wildlife, or historical or scenic value.”³ In the Naval Petroleum Reserve Protection Act of 1976, Congress instructed the Secretary to identify areas with exceptional ecological resources and protect them as Special Areas, specifically identifying Teshekpuk Lake and Utukok River Uplands areas.⁴ Congress also recognized that lands outside of designated Special Areas should not be unnecessarily damaged or disturbed.⁵ When Congress authorized oil and gas leasing in the Reserve, it also specifically mandated that activities ensure “maximum protection” of the Reserve’s values.⁶ To help achieve this, Congress provided the Secretary the authority to impose “conditions, restrictions, and prohibitions” as necessary to prevent “adverse effects on the surface resources.”⁷

Leasing and development decisions in the fragile Arctic, the resources of which are depended upon by so many Alaska Native communities and where substantial impacts are already occurring due to climate change, should not be rushed or hastily made. In this regard, adhering to arbitrary timelines and page limits on the environmental analysis is not appropriate. Fully identifying and analyzing the resources of the Reserve, the areas that must be protected, the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of existing, proposed, and new leasing and development, and the necessary lease stipulations and best management practices that should be employed is a significant undertaking that cannot be done in a year and a mere 300 pages.

³ 42 U.S.C. § 6504.

⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 6504(a).

⁵ H. Conf. Rpt. 94-942 at 21 (Mar. 23, 1976).

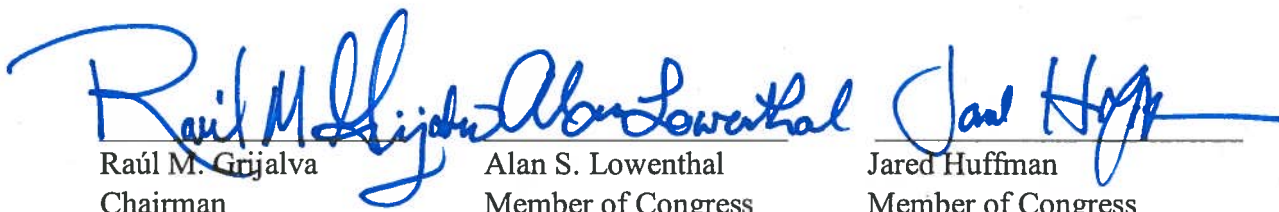
⁶ 42 U.S.C. §§ 6504(a), 6506a(n)(2).

⁷ 42 U.S.C. § 6506a(b).

If BLM proceeds with revising the IAP, we expect that BLM will adhere to its mandates to protect Special Areas and the remarkable ecological values in the Reserve. While we do not find this process necessary, we are confident that any plan that is based on broad public input, sound science, and constructed in compliance with federal mandates will find that protection should be increased for Special Areas and special values, and no additional acreage should be made available for oil and gas development.

Thank you for your attention to these comments.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Chairman
House Committee
On Natural Resources

Alan S. Lowenthal
Member of Congress

Jared Huffman
Member of Congress