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Flawed NPR-A leasing process allowed to stand

Court decision allows BLM to shirk its responsibility to protect public lands

A court decision today allows a 2017 lease sale in the Western Arctic to stand, threatening some of the most ecologically significant areas in the world. The decision comes at a time when the Trump Administration is already rushing forward with plans to expand oil and gas on every front in the Arctic – in the Western Arctic, the Arctic Refuge, and in the Arctic Ocean.

The lawsuit claimed that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management broke the law when it failed to do any environmental analysis prior to the lease sale. BLM failed to look at site-specific and cumulative impacts to the Western Arctic, or National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska, including impacts to fish, wildlife, subsistence, and habitat.

“This ruling is disappointing and fails to address the fact that the BLM has been shirking its responsibility to take a close look at the impacts of its decisions before it gives away our public lands to the oil and gas industry,” said Trustees attorney Suzanne Bostrom. “We believe BLM broke the law and will look at every possible action to hold it accountable.” Trustees for Alaska filed the lawsuit on behalf of five plaintiffs — the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society.

The U.S. District Court ruling today stated that the Bureau of Land Management was not required to do an environmental analysis by looking at either the site-specific impacts of its decision or at new information that indicates that the impacts to fish, wildlife, and subsistence would likely be greater than originally anticipated.

The Trump Administration offered more than 10 million acres of Western Arctic land for lease in 2017 — the largest ever offered in the Reserve. This included sensitive wildlife habitat around the Teshkepek Lake Special Area, one of the largest and most ecologically significant wetland areas in the world.

BLM also failed to preserve its ability to say “no” to later development proposals, even if those proposals would have huge impacts, like disrupting animal migration routes and nesting areas, reducing or eliminating the availability and access to wild foods, and devastating the sustainability and health of wildlife habitat.

Plaintiffs have 60 days to appeal today’s decision.

CLIENT STATEMENTS:

“We’re disappointed that the court chose to side with the current administration’s rushed review processes and choice to put corporate interests above the long term health of Alaska’s lands and people,” **said Lisa Baraff, program director for the Northern Center.** “We believe the BLM should be required to take into account the impacts of development to wildlife, recreation, and the food security of the communities in and around the lease sale area. They should be held accountable. We will continue to work for a future that doesn’t further burden Arctic communities and landscapes for the benefit of outside interests.”

“The current management plan for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska was built on a foundation of broad public input that recognized special areas of critical importance that must be protected,” **said Kristen Miller, Conservation Director at Alaska Wilderness League.** “The Trump administration’s decision to offer every inch of available land in the western Arctic for lease without regard to wildlife or wildlife habitat was incredibly reckless, and we’ll continue to fight actions like this every step of the way. The Trump war on public lands in the name of ‘energy dominance’ is destroying our natural heritage.”

“We are disappointed that the court has sanctioned the BLM’s irresponsible ‘leap before you look’ approach to leasing in the Western Arctic. BLM is pre-authorizing development regardless of what impacts are discovered later and is putting wildlife, habitat and communities at risk,” **said Patrick Lavin, Senior Alaska Representative, Defenders of Wildlife.**

“In their rush to sell off the Arctic to the fossil fuel industry, the Trump administration has failed to account for the serious damage oil and gas activity would do to this sensitive region, and it is disappointing that the court will not hold them accountable,” **said Alli Harvey, Alaska representative for Sierra Club’s Our Wild America campaign.** “We will continue to explore all legal avenues to protect the Western Arctic from destructive development.”

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