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### Senate Leaders Introduce Arctic Refuge Protection Bill

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (Sept. 11, 2019)** — Leaders in the U.S. Senate today [introduced](#) the Arctic Refuge Protection Act to designate the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge a wilderness area and protect its sensitive coastal plain from oil and gas leasing and development. The bill is co-sponsored by Sen. Ed Markey (MA); Sen. Michael Bennet (CO); Sen. Maria Cantwell (WA); Sen. Tom Carper (DE); Sen. Charles Schumer (NY); and Sen. Tom Udall (NM).

The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge was recommended for wilderness status under its current Comprehensive Conservation Plan—issued in 2015—but the Trump administration ignored this recommendation and instead fast-tracked efforts to hold a lease sale by the end of this year to allow oil drilling in this sacred place. Against the wishes of the 70 percent of people across the United States who favor permanent protection for the coastal plain, it was opened for leasing and development by a provision in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

**Drilling in the Arctic Refuge could have disastrous effects for people and wildlife.** The coastal plain provides vital habitat for polar bears, migratory birds and other species and is the calving ground of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Indigenous Gwich'in communities have a spiritual connection to the Arctic Refuge and depend on the caribou to maintain their culture and way of life.

The Arctic is ground zero for climate change. Temperatures there are rising at twice the rate of the rest of the planet. Villages are eroding into the sea, thawing permafrost is making infrastructure insecure, and food sources are disappearing. Oil drilling would compound the devastating climate impacts already being felt in the Arctic Refuge and cause permanent harm to future generations.

In response to today's bill introduction, a coalition of environmental and human rights organizations released the following statements:

"On behalf of the Gwich'in Nation, we thank our congressional leaders for listening to the voice of our people," said **Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee**. "When we have people in leadership respect human rights and Indigenous voices, we know that change is happening. The Gwich'in have a cultural and spiritual connection to the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Our way of life and the caribou have been connected for thousands of years. Our survival is interconnected to the survival of the caribou. Today we give thanks to all who stand with the Gwich'in Nation and those who respect our way of life."

“We applaud our congressional champions Senators Bennet, Cantwell, Carper, Markey, Schumer and Udall for continuing the tradition of strong congressional support for the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This bill would ensure that one of the most imperiled pieces of our natural heritage will be protected now and for future generations of Americans,” said **Adam Kolton, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League**. “It’s vital that Congress restore protections to this national treasure and halt a drilling scheme that is not only deeply unpopular with the American public but that threatens the culture and survival of the Gwich’in people and would double down on carbon pollution at the very time when we need to hasten a transition to cleaner sources of energy.”

“We stand with these courageous, principled senators and millions of Americans who do not see this public land shared by all Americans as a resource to be exploited financially for the short-term profit of the few—at the expense of one of the most vital living wildlife nurseries remaining on our planet. As we begin to work together developing equitable solutions to the consequences of our unsustainable practices, and alternatives to rampant destructive development and thoughtless exploitation—we must draw a line. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is no place to drill,” said **Helen Cherullo, executive director of Braided River**.

“We applaud these senators for taking action to protect this precious—and highly vulnerable—wild landscape from the devastation of oil and gas drilling,” said **Jamie Rappaport Clark, president and CEO of Defenders of Wildlife**. “The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is our nation’s Serengeti, home to the world’s most rapidly declining polar bears, the Porcupine Caribou herd, and countless migratory birds, among other species. This land—sacred to the Gwich’in people—is a wild American treasure our nation and planet cannot afford to lose.”

“We applaud the leadership these senators have demonstrated in moving to protect the coastal plan, the biological heart of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. From a climate and human rights perspective, oil and gas drilling on the Refuge’s coastal plain would bring devastating consequences. We stand with the Gwich’in people to protect this sacred ground, and we urge this Congress to adopt permanent protections for this irreplaceable landscape,” said **Earthjustice Vice President of Policy and Legislation Marty Hayden**.

“For too long, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’s future has been clouded by those who cannot see the forest for the trees,” said **Erik DuMont, public lands conservation campaign director for Environment America**. “Despite featuring some of the most spectacular wildlife migrations on the planet, along with stunning landscapes of mountains, rivers, glaciers and tundra, some still want to destroy it in the name of oil drilling. This option is just plain wrong. With that in mind, Environment America applauds Sens. Ed Markey, Maria Cantwell, Tom Carper, Michael Bennet, Mark Udall and Charles Schumer for introducing a bill to protect the refuge’s coastal plain by designating it as wilderness. We urge the Senate to pass it.”

“We thank these conservation champions for acting to implement the wilderness designation for the coastal plain recommended four years ago by Secretary Jewell and President Obama,” said **Dr. David Raskin, president of the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges**. “We must shield this greatest natural treasure from the threats posed by short-sighted and destructive developments emanating from

Washington. This magnificent resource must be preserved for the Gwich'in people, all Americans, and the health of the planet."

"We applaud Senators Markey, Schumer, Udall, Bennet, Cantwell, and Carper for introducing legislation to protect the majestic Arctic Refuge, home to magnificent wildlife and a place the Gwich'in people call sacred," said **Conservation Program Director Alex Taurel at the League of Conservation Voters**. "The Arctic is ground zero for climate change. Selling out some of our most pristine and vulnerable lands in the region to the oil and gas industry is unconscionable. The people of this country strongly oppose the Trump administration's rush to drill in this precious landscape. It is vital that Congress restore protections for the Arctic Refuge as soon as possible."

"The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is teeming with life—including millions of breeding and migratory birds, caribou, polar bears, muskoxen, fish and an abundance of other wildlife. Oil development would threaten this vibrant ecosystem, as well as the Indigenous Peoples who rely on this sacred land for survival," said **Sarah Greenberger, senior vice president of conservation policy for the National Audubon Society**. "We applaud the co-sponsors of this bill taking action to ensure this special place is permanently protected."

"The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the jewels of the National Wildlife Refuge System," said **Geoffrey L. Haskett, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association**. "The Arctic Refuge, the largest land refuge in the U.S., contains vast and untrammeled landscapes that are home to many species of wildlife that are found nowhere else in our country. We thank the senators for their leadership in designating the Arctic Refuge as wilderness, which will protect hundreds of species of wildlife and ensure these lands remain unchanged for our children and their children."

"This comes in the nick of time," said **Susan Casey Lefkowitz, chief program officer for the Natural Resources Defense Council**. "The Trump administration is set to release its plan to destroy the refuge, turning these vast wildlands over to polluters who'll exploit them for private profit. Huge thumper trucks could kill polar bears, rigs would scar the earth permanently—all in an effort to drill for oil we don't need that will yield pollution our climate can't afford. So this action by Senate leaders could not be more vital to protect the Gwich'in and other Indigenous people, public lands, and wildlife from devastation."

"With the utmost gratitude, on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Alaskans, we thank the co-sponsors of this bill. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge deserves permanent protection and keeping the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge off-limits to oil and gas extraction is a moral as well as climate imperative," said **Elisabeth Balster Dabney, executive director of Northern Alaska Environmental Center**. "We must listen to the Gwich'in Nation and respect this place as irreplaceable and intimately tied to their culture and identity. Now is the time to fully support protecting the Arctic Refuge."

"Drilling in the Arctic Refuge would threaten the food security and human rights of the Gwich'in people and permanently destroy one of the world's last wild places, all to dig up more oil that would worsen the climate crisis. That's why the overwhelming majority of Americans oppose drilling there, as do a growing number of investors and financial institutions," said **Sierra Club Lands Protection Program Director Athan Manuel**. "Now Congress has an opportunity to permanently protect this special place from

corporate polluters. We applaud Sen. Markey and the bill's co-sponsors for their leadership in protecting America's Refuge."

"A majority of people across the United States agree that the Arctic Refuge is too special to sacrifice to drilling and private gain," said **Jamie Williams, president of The Wilderness Society**. "We proudly stand with the Gwich'in people, whose culture and food security are tied to the health of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, and with the co-sponsors of this bill who are responding to the will of the people by calling for the permanent protection of this beautiful, sacred place."

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