

Testimony of Pat Pourchot
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
*Potential for oil and gas exploration and development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,
Alaska*
November 2, 2017

Madam Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the privilege of allowing me to testify today on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Although I have served in several roles in the past with direct involvement in oil and gas issues in Alaska, today I am testifying as a retired public servant and private citizen.

My past “lives” over 45 years in Alaska have included serving as a senator and representative in the Alaska State Legislature, Commissioner of the Alaska State Department of Natural Resources, Land Manager for the Alaska Federation of Natives, Senior Policy Representative with Audubon Alaska, and most recently, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior for Alaska Affairs. These positions have obviously provided me varying viewpoints and experiences with land management and oil and gas issues in Alaska. In fact, I would confess from the onset that I have worked for politicians and organizations that have favored drilling in the Arctic Refuge and for those that have opposed exploration and development.

Since my participation as a congressional staffer in the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) 40 years ago to more recent trips and meetings in the Arctic with DOI Secretaries Salazar and Jewell, I have witnessed the decades of debate on the issue of permitting oil and gas leasing and development in the Refuge. As an Alaskan I fully understand and appreciate the economic benefits that might accrue from oil development in the Refuge.

But, I have come to the conclusion that the last piece of America’s Arctic is more appropriately left as wilderness as a far more valuable legacy for future generations.

I have had the opportunity to hike the mountains and float wilderness rivers in the Refuge, to observe herds of caribou on the Coastal Plain, witness dozens of polar bear on the Beaufort Sea coast, and fly over thousands of snow geese gathering on the coastal plain of the Refuge in early fall. There can be no denying that the Arctic Refuge is one the most special and spectacular places on the planet.

There are many in Alaska who support development in the Refuge that could bring jobs, income to Native corporations and tax dollars to the North Slope Borough. Similarly, Alaska state officials see revenues coming to the state--particularly attractive in these times of huge state budget deficits. But, most of these benefits are short-term, and I think that the Governor and Lt.

Governor would readily agree that more significant actions are now needed to address an annual \$2-2.5 billion shortfall in the state's budget.

America's Arctic of coastal plain and Brooks Range foothills stretch over 600 miles from the Canadian border westward to the Chukchi Sea. Most of this area is available for oil and gas development. In the Central Arctic, oil development on state lands surrounding Prudhoe Bay sprawls for over a hundred miles along the Beaufort Sea coast and inland. Further west, development is proceeding in the 23-million-acre National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. This December the Department of the Interior will hold a lease sale for all currently available acreage in the Reserve—12 million acres, about the size of the entire states of New Hampshire and Vermont combined. The Secretary has also recently announced his intent to review and possibly revise the current plan for the Reserve to potentially make most, if not all, the Reserve available to leasing. West of NPR-A, state and Native-owned lands, available for resource development, abut the Chukchi Sea.

And now, it is proposed to explore and develop that last remaining part of the Arctic coastal plain, our national heritage. There are those that argue that the 1.5 million acres of coastal plain proposed for development in the Refuge represent only a small fraction of the total acreage of the Refuge and would not significantly impact the overall Refuge. But this belies the known biological values of the Refuge. The narrow coastal plain is the biological and ecological "heart" of the Refuge. This region provides key habitat with the highest productivity for calving and migrating caribou, waterfowl, nesting shorebirds, and a host of other wildlife, including terrestrial denning sites for polar bear. The report called for in Section 1002 of ANILCA, issued in 1987, found that "The Arctic Refuge is the only conservation system unit that protects, in an undisturbed condition, a complete spectrum of the Arctic ecosystems in North America." It further found that "[t]he 1002 area is the most biologically productive part of the Arctic Refuge for wildlife and is the center of wildlife activity."

From 2010 to early 2015 the previous Administration undertook an update of the 1988 Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Refuge to ensure that the purposes of the Refuge were being met, to establish management objectives, to incorporate new scientific information on Refuge resources, and other objectives. The plan update involved numerous public meetings and tribal consultations in Alaska, including villages surrounding the Refuge. The draft CCP and environmental statement received over 600,000 comments, most in support of protecting wilderness and wildlife values of the Refuge. The new plan recommended that Congress designate the Coastal Plain as wilderness and that the "1002 Area" continue to be managed as wilderness.

The CCP Record of Decision concluded that these recommendations best met the legislative purposes of the Refuge and the implementation of the Refuge's mission statement:

This untamed arctic landscape continues to sustain the ecological diversity and special values that inspired the Refuge's establishment. Natural processes continue and traditional cultures thrive with the seasons and changing times; physical and mental challenges test our bodies, minds, and spirit; and we honor the land, the wildlife and the native people with respect and restraint. Through responsible stewardship this vast wilderness is passed on, undiminished, to future generations.

And why are we proposing to develop that last remaining part of the Arctic coastal plain? Are we at war and strategically need more oil for our nation's security? Are we suffering lines at the gas pumps and desperately need more domestic oil? Is the price of oil and gasoline so high that we need to increase our supplies? Do we really think that lease revenues will somehow significantly help our federal or state budgets? The answer is clearly "no" to all these questions. And the answer should be "no" to the question of allowing oil and gas development in the Arctic Refuge.

I was greatly moved by the Ken Burns documentary *THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA*. In the late 1950's a dedicated group of Fairbanks residents, including the Fairbanks Garden Club, had a "best idea" for the portion of public land spanning the Brooks Range in the Northeast corner of Alaska. They urged the Department of the Interior to withdraw the area for protection of its wilderness and wildlife values. In 1960 the nine million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Range was created under a land order by Secretary of the Interior Seaton in the Eisenhower Administration for the "purpose of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values.

This "great idea" was renewed in 1980 with the passage of ANILCA in which the Range was expanded and renamed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Its purposes were laid out in statute "to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, the Porcupine caribou herd... polar bears, grizzly bears, muskox, Dall sheep, wolves, wolverines, snow geese, peregrine falcons and other migratory birds and Arctic char and grayling; to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats; to provide... for continued subsistence uses by local residents, and to ensure...water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge."

It is noteworthy that simultaneous to designating the Arctic Range, the national conservation community quietly withdrew its opposition to the Secretary's revocation of a prior land order which had blocked the State from land selections in Arctic Alaska. The lifting of this land order enabled the State to select and develop lands beyond the Range's western boundary, including what became the Prudhoe Bay oil field.

Ken Burns' documentary vividly demonstrates how the heroes of our nation's history are those who had the foresight to act to protect and defend our America's cultural and natural treasures

for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. Those folks of Fairbanks helped protect something of preeminent value to the nation a generation ago for those of us today. Conversely, history and our children will not honor those that would deface one of our nation's most treasured landscapes. The Arctic Refuge should be the very last place we allow oil development.