

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 26, 2019

The Honorable Joe Balash
Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Balash:

We write to commend your leadership at the Department of the Interior (DOI) and offer our continued strong support for the oil and gas leasing program for the Coastal Plain or 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) moves forward with the development of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

We are pleased the Department is complying with its legal mandate to hold multiple lease sales and encourage you to continue to prioritize this program. We believe the Final EIS should maximize acreage available for leasing to fully comply with congressional intent and ensure the greatest possible return to the U.S. Treasury.

With the conclusion of the public comment period for the Draft EIS earlier this month, we trust that you have received extensive public comment and input that will allow you to refine and improve the Draft EIS.

As that process continues, we would note that comments that disagree with the policy rationale of the enacted oil and gas program, rather than the specifics of BLM's administration, are of limited use for developing the EIS. While all comments must be carefully reviewed as you move to a final document, generalized opposition to U.S. energy development that ignores its longstanding coexistence with environmental protection in Alaska adds little value in assessing the particular issues under consideration in the EIS.

As you know, Congress has designated 104 million acres of Alaska as conservation system units. More than 57 million acres of Alaska are untouched, pristine, and have been designated as federal wilderness, including more than eight million acres within ANWR. Comments that call for elevating the conservation purposes of the entire refuge above the oil and gas development purpose of the 1002 Area specifically ignore the immense conservation priority that has been given to lands all across Alaska and within ANWR, while also ignoring congressional intent for the responsible development of a small fraction of the 1002 Area. It is unambiguous that an oil and gas leasing program for the Coastal Plain is one of the co-equal purposes of the refuge.

Similarly, the EIS should fully acknowledge the health of caribou herds across the North Slope and the positive population trends they have shown over the course of development activities that coexist and are coextensive with their range. Stipulations and best management practices have supported and protected caribou and all wildlife populations across the North Slope for decades, and we believe this balance will continue through leasing in the 1002 Area.

We urge you to pay significant attention to the comments of the State of Alaska and the North Slope Borough. Both of these are governmental organizations, with unique obligations and responsibilities to their citizens and the environment that have been developed through democratic process. Both entities have long histories of safely managing oil and gas development, and will play a regulatory role in the exploration and development of oil and gas on leased tracts. Their insights will be material to the development of a robust Final EIS.

We also encourage you to continue your significant efforts to engage the local people – state leaders, the people of the North Slope, and particularly the residents of the village of Kaktovik, the only inhabitants of the Coastal Plain. Their voices and input are critical for this process, and we are thankful DOI has worked hard to meet with and hear from Alaskans in their communities.

To the greatest degree possible, we ask that you move forward with a Final EIS that supports subsistence access for the residents of Kaktovik and mitigates the impacts of development on this subsistence. We recognize that the development of other administrative measures, including revisions to other DOI planning and management documents, may be the best method to ensure these fundamental rights of subsistence access and use are protected. We are committed to continuing to work with you to see these protections put in place.

In this context, we stress that it was our intent that as much acreage as possible be made available for leasing in the 1002 Area. This is expressed by the inclusion of a minimum for area-wide acreage to be offered in sales, and Congress' mandate that all areas with the highest potential for hydrocarbon discovery be included. DOI should take this directive into consideration by developing a Final EIS that maximizes acreage available for lease and increases the Department's flexibility to comply with floors for acreage offered in successive lease sales. Maximizing the acreage available for lease will also increase the expected return to the Treasury.

Finally, as BLM reviews the comments and prepares a Final EIS, we would reiterate that the statutory authorization providing for surface development – up to 2,000 federal acres – is meant as both a restriction to protect the environment and a guarantee that leases can be developed in a timely manner. The 2,000-acre designation provides for reasonable access for the oil and gas program while ensuring that no more than 0.01 percent of the total acreage of ANWR will be developed.

In closing, we thank you for the priority you have given the Coastal Plain oil and gas leasing program. It is critical to the future of Alaska and we stand ready to assist you however we can as the Department proceeds to the Final EIS and its first lease sale in this area of immense resource potential.

Sincerely,


Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator


Dan Sullivan
United States Senator


Don Young
Congressman for All Alaska