



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Northeast NPR-A Supplemental IAP/EIS Comments

Attn: Jim Drucker

ENSR Project Office

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Dear Mr. Drucker:

This letter is in response to the August 2007 Draft Supplemental Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (IAP/EIS) for the Northeast National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A). The primary deficiency in the final Amended IAP/EIS identified by the U.S. District Court in September 2006 was the failure to adequately address cumulative impacts of development on wildlife resources within the NPR-A, many of which in turn are relied upon by subsistence hunters who reside on the North Slope. The Wildlife Society (TWS) believes that a rigorous and meaningful cumulative impacts analysis by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) should include the direct and indirect impacts associated with potential oil and gas exploration, development, and production activities *and* the potential effects of climate change.

The Wildlife Society was founded in 1937 and is a non-profit scientific and educational association of nearly 8,000 professional wildlife biologists and managers, dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Our mission is to enhance the ability of wildlife professionals to conserve diversity, sustain productivity, and ensure responsible use of wildlife resources for the benefit of society.

In previous correspondence, TWS has consistently recommended continued protection of the Teshekpuk Lake Surface Protection Area, including 588,998 acres that were deferred from oil and gas leasing (*No Leasing*) and 268,861 acres of *No Surface Activity*, which were identified in the 1998 Record of Decision. The Wildlife Society submitted comments on the Draft Amended IAP/EIS (19 August 2004), Final Amended EIS/IAP (25 February 2005), and Supplemental IAP/EIS (8 January 2007), and TWS also met with the BLM (4 April 2005). In the above correspondence and meeting, TWS recommended that the BLM ensure protection of large lakes used by molting geese; habitats used by the Teshekpuk Lake Caribou Herd during calving, migration and insect relief periods; and wetlands that hundreds of thousands of migratory birds depend on during breeding, brood-rearing and staging. Our comments here will focus primarily on the IAP/EIS cumulative effects analysis. Our concern continues to be that the highly productive wetlands surrounding Teshekpuk Lake and the wildlife populations that depend on these seasonally important habitats in the Northeast NPR-A planning area could be negatively

impacted and potentially irreparably damaged by opening these lands to oil and gas development.

General comments on cumulative effects analysis:

The U.S. District Court required that cumulative effects analysis be a major objective of this supplemental IAP/EIS. Unfortunately, the analysis presented in this plan is mostly a general literature review and qualitative discussion of potential cumulative effects that does not incorporate the potential impacts of climate change consistently or rigorously. The IAP/EIS (e.g., 4-757, caribou) primarily describes qualitative differences in cumulative effects among alternatives rather than attempting to quantify differences with stated levels of uncertainty. Few analyses in the IAP/EIS appeared to incorporate comprehensive data into a geographic information system (GIS) for spatial analysis, modeling, or quantifying the probability of effects at development thresholds. It would have been instructive to portray even simple scenarios of future industry infrastructure (roads, pipelines, pads) among development alternatives using a GIS and then overlay the condition and status of biological resources and subsistence harvest to quantify spatial relationships within the planning area, particularly in light of changing conditions on the North Slope (e.g., rate of coastal erosion that will reduce the area of insect relief for caribou north of Teshekpuk Lake). It does not appear that such evaluations were even attempted.

The IAP/EIS (4-756) states, "...the large amount of natural variation inherent in the system limits our current understanding of the consequences of climate change. This and the complexity of tundra ecosystems make predicting the effects of climate change on terrestrial mammals difficult." TWS recognizes the difficulty in evaluating climate change and the potential impacts on resources, including the level of uncertainty with forecasts. However, that is the purpose of this IAP/EIS, and in highly uncertain conditions, such as this, it is best to be conservative in making decisions that could have long-term effects on critical natural resources. Unfortunately, the document contains little quantitative analysis and lacked simulation modeling, trends analysis, or substantive GIS mapping on which to base such decisions.

Wildlife professionals have provided detailed comments and expressed concern previously over the risk of development impacts on the wildlife resources in the Northeast Planning Area (Teshekpuk Caribou Herd, waterfowl and raptor nesting, goose molting, shorebird migration, plus federally threatened and endangered species). In light of these previous comments and recognized value of these resources, we believe this IAP/EIS lacks scientific rigor and is inadequate for making informed decisions regarding resource management for this important ecosystem within the Northeast NPR-A planning area.

Caribou:

The Teshekpuk Lake caribou herd is an important subsistence resource, providing most of the caribou harvested by the North Slope communities of Atkasuk, Barrow, Nuiqsut, and Wainwright. Telemetry data have documented that over 90% of pregnant cows calve in the area south, east, and north of Teshekpuk Lake. There is a narrow corridor of land between the east side of Teshekpuk Lake and the Kogru Inlet through which nearly all of the maternal cows must

travel through shortly before or after calving to get to insect relief areas. In most years, more than 75% of the herd uses the area around and north of Teshekpuk Lake for relief during the insect season.

The IAP/EIS (4-159) states that maternal females are displaced by no less than 1.2 to 2.4 miles from roads because of human activity. Roads and infrastructure would have to be placed outside of wetlands on the limited surfaces between the lakes in the Northeast planning area, particularly north of Teshekpuk Lake. After construction activity that could occur during winter, infrastructure will require year-round monitoring for safety and operations resulting in periodic and sometimes frequent surface travel, even during periods when caribou calve or seek relief from insects. We are unaware of any substantive attempt by BLM to use GIS to simulate potential road networks and produce 1.2 or 2.4 mile buffers on each side of such roads to calculate the amount of surface area in which maternal caribou would potentially be displaced under various leasing alternatives.

The IAP/EIS (4-753) states that in context to the entire Arctic Coastal Plain and North Slope, cumulative impacts on caribou habitat would be relatively small occurring on only 1.3% and the coastal plain and 0.29% of the North Slope. However, the discussion acknowledged that "...these estimates do not take into account the quality of habitat that would be impacted on the North Slope...Areas to the north and east of Teshekpuk Lake provide important calving, post-calving, and insect-relief habitat for TLH caribou. Thus, impact to caribou and other mammals from development in this area would likely be much greater than if development occurred in areas that were little used by caribou." Thus, while it concedes that the potential cumulative effects of development on the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd could be greater, there was no attempt to quantify the potential cumulative effects on the herd.

The IAP/EIS states (4-754) that the effects of oil and gas development "...on the TLH, CAH, and WAH caribou would accumulate with other past effects on these herds, although the likely magnitude of these effects is difficult to ascertain, especially given the increase in herd sizes that have occurred in recent years in spite of oil and gas development on the North Slope." The only Arctic herd that has significantly overlapped major oil and gas development is the CAH. To suggest that the magnitude of these effects is difficult to ascertain without first attempting to conduct a cumulative effects analysis demonstrates a lack of understanding of the science inherent in conducting an appropriate and comprehensive EIS.

Polar Bears:

The IAP/EIS (4-789) describes impacts that may affect polar bears in the southern Beaufort Sea population. The focus is on the direct loss of tundra habitat, which makes up a relatively small percentage of the coastal plain. Seismic and exploration activity during late fall and winter are acknowledged to be the activities most likely to have adverse impacts on polar bears, primarily denning females and cubs. Unfortunately, there is no spatial analysis or attempt to measure the amount of coastal habitat impacted that are also denning areas. The continued reduction in ice cover in the Beaufort Sea from climate change will likely result in more polar bears using terrestrial habitats along the coastline for protracted periods of time, thus increasing potential conflicts with human activities, including oil development, The IAP/EIS states (4-791) that: "Recent past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions that could affect polar bears are not

expected to accumulate to the level that result in population level effects.” There is no quantitative analysis or modeling to support this statement. In contrast, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has found sufficient evidence to warrant listing of polar bears as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act and prepared a proposed rule in January 2007.

Waterfowl and shorebirds:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has previously documented that the numbers of Pacific brant and the total numbers of all geese that use the area north and east of Teshekpuk Lake exceed those of any known molting area in the North American and Siberian Arctic. Changes in environmental conditions are expected to cause shifts in the distribution and abundance of goose populations utilizing the Teshekpuk area. The Service has also previously documented that shorebird breeding densities and concentrations of staging shorebirds are greatest at coastal locations in the NPR-A, particularly north and east of Teshekpuk Lake. Development within the Teshekpuk area will have disproportionately greater effect on shorebirds than development further inland. Concerns are greatest for shorebird species that are declining and are found in greater than average abundance in the Teshekpuk Lake area, including dunlin, red phalarope, and ruddy turnstone. Stresses associated with oil development (aircraft overflight or activity associated with surface occupation) could add to or accelerate impacts already underway to molting geese, breeding or migrating shorebirds, and other wildlife as a result of climate change. No attempt was made in the IAP/EIS to quantify the extent of spatial overlap between levels of disturbance in the four alternatives relative to molting or staging areas, or to assess the potential for displacement or increased energetic costs to the birds.

Summary:

The 2006 Record of Decision largely ignored the recommendations of The Wildlife Society, National Audubon Society, Pacific Flyway Council, Wildlife Management Institute, Ducks Unlimited, North Slope Borough, and the California Waterfowl Association. The Environmental Protection Agency recommended that the BLM maintain lands closed or under *No Surface Activity* restrictions as specified in the No Action Alternative. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated that avoiding surface disturbance in the most biologically sensitive areas, as presented in the No Action Alternative, would provide the greatest level of protection (and least risk) to wildlife, and was its preferred management approach.

The Draft Supplemental IAP/EIS does little to assure wildlife professionals that BLM conducted an adequate cumulative effects analysis on the risk of oil and gas development to the wildlife resources within the Northeast Planning Area of the NPR-A. Without a science-based plan and a credible quantitative comparison of alternatives, it is impossible to reliably estimate the impacts of the various alternatives considered, particularly in light of recent and forecasted trends associated with climate change. Under the circumstances, the precautionary approach and most responsible action is to support Alternative A; maintain the *No-leasing* and *No Surface Activity* areas in the *Teshekpuk Lake Surface Protection Area*; and maintain the lack of road connection between the *Teshekpuk Lake Surface Protection Area* and other oilfield developments on the North Slope. These options are supported by nearly all wildlife experts who have reviewed this plan.

TWS appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments to the BLM. Please contact me if you need a copy of any previous comments by TWS or literature cited therein. Thank you for considering the views of wildlife professionals.

Sincerely,

Michael Hutchins, Ph.D.
Executive Director/CEO

cc: Tom Lonnie, BLM Alaska State Director
Henri Bisson, BLM Deputy Director
Edward Itta, Mayor, North Slope Borough