

January 14, 2019

*Submitted via email*

Nicole Hayes  
Project Manager  
Attn: Coastal Plain Oil and Gas  
Leasing Program EIS  
222 West 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Stop #13  
Anchorage, Alaska 99513  
[mnhayes@blm.gov](mailto:mnhayes@blm.gov)  
[blm\\_ak\\_coastalplain\\_EIS@blm.gov](mailto:blm_ak_coastalplain_EIS@blm.gov)

Re: Request for additional public hearings for Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Program Draft Environmental Impact Statement, 83 Fed. Reg. 67,337.

Dear Ms. Hayes,

We, the undersigned organizations representing millions of members nationally and internationally, respectfully request additional public hearings during the public comment period for the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Notice of Availability of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program and Announcement of Public Subsistence-Related Hearings, 83 Fed. Reg. 67,337 (Dec. 28, 2018). The Arctic Refuge is held in stewardship for *all* citizens as one of the crown jewels of America's public lands system. The currently planned hearings fall short of giving the public at large a say on these proceedings. To rectify this, we request hearings in the following locations to ensure that people from areas around the country can have their voices heard on the importance of protecting the Coastal Plain: Albuquerque, New Mexico; Denver, Colorado; Seattle, Washington; and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The commitment of our community of millions of American members — each of whom is a co-owner of this extraordinary wildlife refuge — and our international members — who have an interest in this internationally recognized area — is strong. Our interest and commitment to protecting the Refuge is also longstanding; together, this community has advocated for a legislative wilderness designation for the Coastal Plain for nearly forty years. Our members are likewise dedicated to participating in BLM's lease sale review process. As BLM is aware, more than 700,000 public comments were submitted during the scoping phase strongly opposing all oil and gas activities on the Coastal Plain.

Public participation is a core purpose of NEPA. BLM must ensure adequate opportunity to engage the public in each step of this process.<sup>1</sup> It is imperative that BLM ensure that any process to consider leasing on the Coastal Plain allows for robust participation by the interested public.<sup>2</sup> During the scoping hearings, Department of Interior officials indicated that they would be open

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<sup>1</sup> 40 C.F.R. §§ 1500.2(d), 1506.6.

<sup>2</sup> 40 C.F.R. § 1503.1(a)(4).

to requests for additional hearings on the draft EIS. Additional hearings would help to ensure meaningful participation in this process by the interested public across the nation.

BLM's press release announcing the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) indicated that hearings will take place in Anchorage, Arctic Village, Fairbanks, Kaktovik, Fort Yukon, Venetie, and Utqiagvik, Alaska, and Washington, D.C. We support a robust schedule of meetings throughout Alaska. But because the wildlife refuge is owned by all Americans and given the significant national interest in protecting its exceptional resources and opposition to oil and gas in the Coastal Plain, there is both substantial controversy concerning the proposed action and substantial interest in holding additional hearings.<sup>3</sup>

We also request that notice of the hearings be provided at least two weeks prior to the hearing date to give our members and the public sufficient time to prepare remarks. Ensuring that the public has sufficient time to review the draft EIS and related documents prior to the hearings is essential to the public's ability to provide substantive comments during the hearings, as requested by BLM.

Many of our groups also submitted a request for a comment extension on December 21, 2018. The Federal Register notice stated that the comment period is until February 11, 2019, 45 days from publication. We requested an extension to submit comments for this important process until Monday, April 29, 2019. BLM has yet to respond to this request. We reiterate it here, with the additional request that the public comment period also be extended to account for the government shutdown, i.e., 77 days plus the number of days that the government was shutdown.

Additional time and hearings are particularly important because of the partial government shutdown. At the end of the day on December 21<sup>st</sup>, funding for the Department of the Interior lapsed. Despite agency guidance that websites are to remain active during a shutdown, BLM's Coastal Plain e-planning page and comment portal were unavailable for at least 6 days during that time (Dec. 22–26 and Dec. 28), meaning that no one could access the draft EIS and related documents or utilize the commenting portal. In addition, BLM staff have not been available to answer questions and respond to information requests. Concerted efforts on BLM's part must be made once BLM is up and running once again to make up for the lack of staff and online availability during the shutdown. An extension of the public comment period will also ensure that other federal agency staff with relevant expertise who have been furloughed have adequate time to review and comment on the draft EIS. Adding public hearings will also help make up for the impact of a shutdown on the public's ability to comment and participate, as will extending the comment period to account for the shutdown period, in addition to the pending 77-day extension request.

In sum, we request that additional hearings be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Denver, Colorado; Seattle, Washington; and Minneapolis, Minnesota, and that you provide at least two-weeks' notice of all hearings so that people can adequately prepare and meaningfully participate. We also repeat our request for an extension of the public comment period. Please confirm receipt of this request.

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<sup>3</sup> 40 C.F.R. § 1506.6(c).

Sincerely,

Monica Scherer  
Director of Outreach  
Alaska Wilderness League

Ed Schmitt  
President of the Board  
Alaska Wildlife Alliance

Norma Kassi  
Indigenous Collaboration  
Arctic Institute of Community Based  
Research

Kristen Monsell  
Senior Attorney  
Center for Biological Diversity

Nicole Whittington-Evans  
Alaska Program Director  
Defenders of Wildlife

Erik Grafe  
Staff Attorney  
Earthjustice

Erik DuMont  
Public Lands Conservation Campaign  
Director  
Environment America

Jessica Gerard  
Coalition Care  
Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition

David C. Raskin, Ph.D.  
President  
Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges

Garett Rose  
Staff Attorney - Alaska Project  
Natural Resources Defense Council

Ryan Arash Marsh  
Arctic Program Director  
Northern Alaska Environmental Center

Alli Harvey  
Senior Arctic Campaign Representative  
Sierra Club

Matt Krogh  
Extreme Oil Director  
Stand.earth

Ben Greuel  
Arctic Refuge Campaign Director  
The Wilderness Society

Brook Brisson  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Trustees for Alaska

Fran Mauer  
Alaska Representative  
Wilderness Watch

CC:

Ted Murphy, Acting State Director, BLM, [t75murph@blm.gov](mailto:t75murph@blm.gov)  
Greg Siekaniec, Regional Director, U.S. FWS, [greg\\_siekaniec@fws.gov](mailto:greg_siekaniec@fws.gov)  
Joe Balash, Assistant Secretary of Land and Minerals Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, [joseph\\_balash@ios.doi.gov](mailto:joseph_balash@ios.doi.gov)  
Steve Wackowski, Senior Advisor for Alaska Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior, [stephen\\_wackowski@ios.doi.gov](mailto:stephen_wackowski@ios.doi.gov)