

Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Resource Potential
Written Testimony of
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Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Good morning, Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Dexter, and members of the Committee. I am Nagruk Harcharek, President and CEO of the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, also known simply as VOICE.

VOICE was founded a decade ago by our region's elected Iñupiaq leadership for the people of the North Slope of Alaska to speak with a unified voice on issues that impact our ancestral homelands. Today, we represent 21 member organizations, including local governments, Alaska Native Corporations, federally recognized tribes, and tribal non-profits across the North Slope of Alaska. Together we represent a throughline within a fragmented system of Alaska Native representation, and work closely to serve, provide for, and enrich the lives of the North Slope Iñupiat. The North Slope is larger than the state of Minnesota, and encompasses eight communities — none of which are connected by permanent roads — making the cost of living high and economic opportunity low. The North Slope fully encompasses the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) and over half of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), including the 1002 area, also known as the Coastal Plain.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the critical relationship between the North Slope Iñupiat and the federal government. Important recent events give us hope for a more constructive and respectful relationship than in previous years.

I had the honor of testifying two years ago in the hearing "Examining the Biden Administration's Mismanagement of the Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Program." It was an opportunity to explain the previous administration's unprecedented unilateral actions in the NPR-A and ANWR, and how they ignored and silenced the very people those actions would impact most.

The Trump administration has drastically shifted national policy and its approach in the NPR-A and ANWR. While these initial changes are promising, they must be long-lasting to be truly effective. It is critical we cultivate and maintain a sustainable relationship centered in Iñupiaq self-determination, mutual trust, and respect.

ANCSA: Our Fight for Land Rights and Recognition

To understand why these values are so important to us, it is critical to recognize the history of the North Slope Iñupiat. The Iñupiat have lived on Alaska's North Slope for more than

10,000 years. Our ancestors survived through a culture of subsistence and reliance on nature that remains to this day. Iñupiaq ideology does not allow us to separate ourselves from *si/a* — or everything in our environment from the land to the sun and stars. We, as people, are inseparable from our land, waters, and animals, and are an integral part of the ecosystem.

In 1867, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia. Despite early acknowledgement of Alaska Native peoples and their rights to land claims in the Treaty of Cession and the Organic Act of 1884, aboriginal land claims were left unresolved for over a century. In 1958, Congress passed the Alaska Statehood Act, which once again acknowledged but left aboriginal land claims unresolved, and promised the newly recognized state over 100 million acres of land.

Over and over again the federal government repeatedly failed to address our land claims while steadily expanding their own hold over large tracts of North Slope land. The Naval Petroleum Reserve Number No. 4 was established in 1923 by President Harding. It later became the NPR-A and expanded to over 23 million acres, solely located on the ancestral homelands of the North Slope Iñupiat. The Arctic National Wildlife Range was established in 1960, which is located on our eastern homelands, directly where Kaktovik is based. In 1980, the area was expanded and renamed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge — it is now 19 million acres and Kaktovik remains the only community located within it.

To protect our land rights, our leaders formed the Arctic Slope Native Association (ASNA) and filed a lawsuit in January 1966 against the Department of the Interior (DOI) that laid claim to nearly 55 million acres of ancestral homelands. This soon inspired Alaska Native peoples across the state who were experiencing the same issues; later that year, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) was formed to represent 17 Alaska Native organizations and advocate for aboriginal land claims. In December 1966, DOI Secretary Stewart Udall imposed a land freeze that halted any further conveyances within Alaska until Indigenous land claims had been settled.

Do not mistake this as an easy win for Alaska Natives. This was the result of years of lobbying and fighting for a voice at the table. Our early leaders planned bake sales and bingo games just to scrape up enough money to travel to our nation's capital, and once they arrived they were repeatedly disrespected.

As it is, the land claims debate would have languished had it not been for the discovery of commercial quantities of oil in Prudhoe Bay in March 1968 — on lands conveyed to the State of Alaska before Secretary Udall's land freeze — that fast-tracked the process. This quickly led to the passage of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which conveyed a total of 44 million acres to newly created Alaska Native corporations and compensated them nearly \$1 billion for lands lost.

The North Slope Iñupiat received only a small piece of the total. In fact, ANCSA only awarded the North Slope Iñupiat with nearly 5 million acres out of the 55 million acres originally claimed by ASNA. We also received \$22 million in the settlement — while the first two parcels of Alaska Native land at Prudhoe Bay that were auctioned to oil companies following ANCSA netted \$900 million. The lands that had previously been taken by the federal government for the NPR-A and ANWR were off limits during ANCSA land selections, even though four of our communities are located within the NPR-A and Kaktovik is located within ANWR. The North Slope Iñupiat were the only Alaska Native people to oppose ANCSA. Knowing this settlement was not a fair and just settlement or in the best interest of our people, ASNA went as far as writing President Nixon not to sign ANCSA into law, but our protests were ignored.

Brenda Itta-Lee, one of our early leaders, said on the bill's passing: "There was such a deep sense of loss. It was as if the titles in our Aboriginal lands were gone. [We] walked out with very heavy hearts."

Our leaders understood what was at stake. We knew with the discovery of oil and gas the backbone of Alaska's economy would be built on our homelands. While much of our ancestral homelands had already been taken from us, there was now an opportunity to create economic security that would allow our people to maintain our traditions and position us to better fight for our communities. That's why the North Slope Borough was formed in 1972, to exercise local self-government and ensure our people benefitted from the development happening in our backyard. This too was no easy win — the State of Alaska, backed by the weight of the oil industry, sued our region's leaders and took the battle all the way to the State Supreme Court.

Nevertheless, today, as a home-rule government, 95% of the North Slope Borough's revenue comes from taxation on oil and gas infrastructure. These funds support essential services like schools, health clinics, modern water and sewer systems, world-class wildlife management, and research supporting Indigenous subsistence traditions.

The [results](#) speak for themselves: In 1980, the average life expectancy of a person born in the North Slope Borough was just 65. By 2014, a baby born in the same region could expect to live more than a decade longer, to an average of 77 years. This is a direct result of the revenues from resource development projects, and these resources being reinvested into our communities for modern amenities.

This is the cycle we have lived for generations: asserting our rights, building governance, and defending our place at the table. On the North Slope, every aspect of life has been shaped by the resolve of our people — whether in the defense of subsistence hunting, the pursuit of land claims, or countless other struggles. The strength of our early leaders helped us secure greater control of our lands and resources — control that we assert today.

Thanks to these efforts, our communities have gained lasting benefits from responsible resource development. Within just a few generations, tax revenues made it possible to build the foundations of a healthier, stronger future rooted in the self-determination of the North Slope Iñupiat.

The Biden Administration: An Era of Uneven Promises

I share this history not to rehash old wounds, but because this treatment still remains unfortunately relevant to our ongoing relationship with the federal government. Throughout the Biden administration, we were repeatedly ignored and blindsided by announcements that would have massive implications on our ancestral homelands, and by extension our people. While the Biden administration made the correct decision in re-approving the Willow Project, broadly speaking regarding the NPR-A and ANWR, the previous administration repeatedly chose to ignore the elected leadership of the only communities their policies would affect.

While this treatment was not surprising given our fraught history, it was particularly hypocritical coming from an administration that claimed to be the most Tribal-friendly in the nation's history. As President Biden himself stated in the Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships, "we best serve Native American people when tribal governments are empowered to lead their communities, and when federal officials speak with and listen to tribal leaders in formulating federal policy."

In one of the most egregious instances of the Biden administration overstepping the bounds of its authority, in September 2023 the DOI announced that they were cancelling seven leases in ANWR, proposed an unnecessary, redundant supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) for ANWR, and a proposed a rule to ban activity in nearly half of the NPR-A. Five of the eight North Slope communities are located within the NPR-A and ANWR, yet there was no notice given. It is also worth noting that a federal judge later ruled that the cancellation of these ANWR leases was unlawful.

As previously mentioned, less than two weeks after that announcement — and almost two years ago to the date — I testified in front of another House Natural Resources subcommittee to share how these decisions had the potential to devastate the North Slope economy, communities, and culture. As I detailed above, the North Slope Iñupiat rely on responsible resource development to maintain our economies, communities, and culture. Today, thanks to the foresight of our mid-20th century leaders to capture local benefit from the oil and gas development on our ancestral homelands through the creation of the North Slope Borough, we have modern amenities. This means when you're cold, you can turn up the thermostat. When it's dark, you flip a light switch. When you go to the bathroom, it's using a flush toilet. When you're sick, you go to a village clinic or our modern hospital in Utqiagvik. You can earn a college degree at our very own Iñisaġvik College. You can count on a job pipeline throughout the network of private and government entities that serve our region. The future of every single one of these basic resources that those in the Lower-48 take for granted were put at risk by the Biden administration's actions.

In my previous testimony, I shared how neither VOICE nor any of our members received notice about the announcement — instead we learned about it from the media. The only people directly affected by these decisions were not included in the process. Our culture, our health and safety, and our children and grandchildren's futures were threatened, and we had to read about it in a press release.

This is not to say that everyone in D.C. has ignored us. I am incredibly grateful to our allies on both sides of the aisle in Congress who invited us to share our story, and for later introducing Alaska's Right to Produce Act, which would have reversed these actions on our homelands. We had hoped that after travelling more than 3,000 miles to testify that the Biden administration would be forced to hear our voices and treat us with respect.

The Biden Administration: National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska

When the proposed NPR-A rule was announced in September 2023, at least 10 major North Slope and Alaska Native groups sent a letter to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) requesting an extension on the comment period for the proposed rule. These groups ranged from North Slope municipal and tribal governments to Alaska Native Corporations and the influential state-wide coalition group, the Alaska Federation of Natives.

The originally proposed comment period was severely insufficient to allow the most affected and relevant organizations to provide their feedback — especially when no North Slope organization had received prior warning on the proposed rule. Additionally, in June 2023, an undersea ice scouring event cut the fiber optic cable which services four communities on the North Slope, including Utqiagvik, the regional hub. Following the ice scour, those four North Slope communities — along with other rural northwest and western Alaskan communities — lost reliable internet, land line, and cell phone service from June through September 19, 2023, when the cable was repaired. This means that these communities did not have service restored until 13 days after the proposed rule was announced, cutting into an already short review time.

While the DOI later claimed that they had sent information regarding the proposed rule ahead of its announcement via snail-mail, not one of VOICE's members received any correspondence until November 12, 2023 — more than two months after its announcement and less than a month before the comment period closed — and that was via email. Regardless of administration, the DOI regularly communicates announcements, consultations, and other important information via both email and snail mail. Yet, when it came to sharing the 2023 NPR-A proposed rule, the DOI could not be bothered to communicate with the affected communities. This remained true even in-person. In an Anchorage public meeting, no one from the crowd was allowed to speak, DOI comments were collected by notecard, and the officials handpicked which comments to discuss. When confronted with these realities, the Biden administration refused to grant the full 90-day extension requested by North Slope and Alaska Native entities. Rather, the DOI was holding themselves to an arbitrary timeline best described by DOI Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management, when she admitted on the record that the

condensed timeframe for the comment period was being driven to avoid the Congressional Review Act. She said, “Yeah, I wish we could, we hardly ever give extensions that long on rulemaking. In other contexts we might have that kind of time, but I'm happy to regale you with the ins and outs of the Congressional Review Act, but unfortunately, we're on a schedule with this one that we don't have any control over, so we just don't have that kind of time for this rule.”

In other words, we were not given adequate time to comment because the administration was attempting to avoid the rule falling within the timeframe in which you, Congress, could use the Congressional Review Act to overturn it. This indicates a lack of faith that the rule could withstand Congressional review, an indication that another entity besides the DOI was behind this condensed timeline, and that the results were predetermined.

It was therefore devastating but unsurprising when the final NPR-A rule was released, with no changes that considered the North Slope Iñupiat. VOICE was left with no choice but to sue the federal government in the hopes that the court would see fault in the actions of the federal administration.

It ultimately appeared that the Biden administration showed little remorse for this treatment, as they continued to attempt to make announcements about and take action in the NPR-A up through January 16, 2025 — just four days before the change in administration. At this point it was clear that their policies did not have the support of the American people behind them, but they continued to try to restrict our self-determination in the NPR-A to the last possible moment.

The Biden Administration: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

As stated above, also announced in September 2023, was the SEIS for ANWR and cancellation of leases within the area. The public comment period for the ANWR SEIS was a meager 45 days. Saddled with an inadequate comment period, the DOI (both Fish and Wildlife Service and the BLM) continued to make public engagement difficult through a series of cancelled meetings, general confusion, and a seeming disinterest in our elected leaders' voices.

In one instance, at least five North Slope entities requested the DOI reschedule a public meeting in Utqiagvik. Utqiagvik is the regional seat of government, with many of the regional entities headquartered in the community of about 5,000 people. The entities that requested rescheduling cited inadequate notice (they were given three business days), subsistence obligations with fall whaling, a previously scheduled community event that would be widely attended by elected officials, and that the community was struggling with internet connectivity following the fiber optic cable break in June. As a result, less than ten people showed up to the meeting, including a representative from the State, who flew in from Anchorage. The DOI stated at that public meeting that they could not reschedule the meeting because a visiting member of the foreign media was present. When she heard this reasoning during the meeting, the member of the media in question publicly shared that

she had not asked for the meeting to be, or remain, at this time, and was surprised she was being used as an excuse by the DOI.

The day following the public meeting, the federally recognized tribe for the North Slope region, the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, was physically handed the over 1,400-page document to provide comments. This is how the “most tribally friendly” administration treated the regional tribe of the North Slope — giving them less than three weeks to review a 1,400-page document, elevating the media above the people who will have to live with their decisions, and taking actions on our homelands without notice, meaningful engagement, or consultation.

Throughout the short 45-day public comment period, it became increasingly clear that the DOI was simply trying to check the box on what was legally required of them and were not interested in meaningful engagement or feedback that did not fit their predetermined goals.

Lastly, on ANWR, I want to share a quote from Charles Lampe, who testified before this body in November 2023 on the impact these restrictions would have. One of his opening lines was, “But most importantly, I am Iñupiaq and I am here to show that we exist!” His message was simple: we, the North Slope Iñupiat, exist. He and his fellow Kaktovikmiut had been erased — literally erased — on maps of their homelands published by the previous administration. Their voices, as the only people that live within ANWR, were ignored, and are still ignored by many today.

For coastal North Slope communities, the comment period furthermore coincided exactly with our fall whaling season, one of the busiest times of the year. A whaling crew in Kaktovik — which is the only community located within ANWR — caught their first whale of the season the same day the announcement was made. When a whaling crew is successful, it takes an entire community to prepare the catch to be shared with all families, with everyone celebrating with a feast a day or two after the catch. This is a cultural subsistence practice that the North Slope Iñupiat have practiced for millennia, and yet the Biden administration was essentially asking us to choose between our ancestral tradition and having the ability to comment on an unnecessary, redundant SEIS process.

While I am not from Kaktovik, and do not speak directly for their community, VOICE and all our members support the community of Kaktovik’s right to self-determination. They have a right to determine what happens on their homelands. In that vein, VOICE’s Board of Directors passed a resolution supporting the exploration and development of the 1002 area, the Coastal Plain, in ANWR. Like the people of Kaktovik, we are unapologetic when supporting the self-determination of our people.

The Trump Administration: Cautious Optimism

We are encouraged by the first nine months of the Trump administration and 119th Congress. Through executive orders, secretarial orders, department actions, and legislation passed, both have made clear that not only are our homelands important to the future and security of this nation, but so are the people that inhabit these resource rich lands.

On Day One of the new administration, the North Slope was made a clear priority through President Trump's Executive Order No. 14153, "Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Resource Potential" — which directed the DOI to reverse the Biden administration's overreaching policies in the NPR-A and ANWR.

We were optimistic to see this immediate shift in tone, though we understandably remain cautious. We have spent decades with our lives in the balance, with executive policy shifting rapidly depending on the sitting President. The Trump administration — and this committee — listened to this concern and included provisions that will restore opportunities for North Slope Iñupiat control and self-determination within the NPR-A and ANWR in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act also included increased tax credits for subsistence whaling captains. This inclusion will help our whaling captains afford fuel, safety gear, and other necessities. It will benefit all eleven whaling communities, and go well beyond benefiting a few individuals, as the whaling captains provide for the whole community. When a whaling crew is successful, the entire community is fed. To make this happen, captains sometimes sacrifice their own financial well-being. In the words of Justina Wilhelm, the president of Iḷisaḡvik College and a whaling captain's wife in Utqiagvik: "Whaling is a year-long process. Feeding the community requires a large financial commitment, and as a captain and wife we have to sacrifice other areas to support our whaling needs. We look forward to seeing how this will offset our expenses."

In June this year, three members of the high-level National Energy Dominance Council — the honorary Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum, Secretary of Energy Chris Wright, and Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency Lee Zeldin — made history by visiting the North Slope to discuss land policy, energy development in the region, and Iñupiaq self-determination.

During the previous administration, North Slope Iñupiat leaders requested to meet with DOI Secretary Deb Haaland at least nine times over the course of several years to discuss policies on our homelands before she finally agreed to a meeting in June of 2024. The meeting was held after the final SEIS for ANWR was released and the final NPR-A Rule was published. We met in D.C. and the meeting resulted in no meaningful outcomes.

By contrast, Secretary Burgum, Secretary Wright, and Administrator Zeldin were eager to see the North Slope in person to truly understand the realities of living in our world. The first thing they did when arriving — before visiting any energy infrastructure — was

interacting with the community and elected leaders of the North Slope. They spent two days in Utqiagvik, taking the time to listen, and they repeatedly emphasized their commitment to Iñupiaq self-determination. Secretary Wright stated, “You just need us to get out of your way and give you back your sovereignty.” He concluded his remarks saying, “I can assure you that everyone at this table and the full administration of Washington, D.C. wants to restore your rights, restore your liberty, not just because it will win for you, but you will make America better. You will make America stronger and you will give everyone in the world a higher quality of living.”

This visit was not taken lightly by leaders and members of our North Slope communities. Charles Lampe, President of the Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation, said: “For Kaktovik, the sole community within ANWR, it’s critical that our perspective is not only acknowledged but reflected in the policies that impact our ancestral homelands. Engagement at this level signals respect for our right to cultural and economic self-determination and opens the door to shaping our future on our own terms.” A far cry from his 2023 testimony mentioned above.

Having been denied this level of respect for decades, this visit and the words shared were not taken lightly. We immediately saw the National Energy Dominance Council put this philosophy into action when Secretary Burgum announced, while in Utqiagvik, a draft rule rescinding the 2024 NPR-A Rule, which — as I’ve detailed — not a single community on the North Slope supported. Announcing this directly to the people who are most impacted by this rule is a demonstration of what a respectful and productive relationship should look like.

This committee is personally aware of how difficult it is to travel from D.C. to Alaska. I would be remiss if I did not reiterate our gratitude for your visit last month led by Chairman Westerman, as well as a trip led by Chairman Stauber last year to see development on federal land and to meet with the local community of Nuiqsut. Regardless of the administration, several members of this committee have remained our champions, and have joined in our fight for our right to self-determination.

The Road Ahead: Respect for Iñupiaq Self-Determination

The way forward requires continued mutual respect and a willingness to see one another as partners. We do not ask for special treatment — we ask for fair, consistent treatment. We ask to be meaningfully engaged, to be consulted as the law requires, and to be respected as the people who have called the North Slope home for millennia, well before any natural resources were discovered by outsiders.

We are encouraged by the words and actions of the current administration and look forward to continuing to work together. VOICE is dedicated to ensuring that the people that are most affected by decisions about our homelands — those that live there — are meaningfully included in the process. As members of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, we would appreciate your help.

A true respect for our right to self-determination is the only way to ensure we can continue our traditions and protect our communities. I leave you with the words of Eben Hopson Sr., the first Mayor of the North Slope Borough and a visionary who, with others, laid the groundwork for our journey:

“The desire for self-determination on the part of the people who wish to exercise that right should not be denied by those that govern. I think every opportunity should be afforded the people who wish to initiate and suffer the hardships of self-determination through a more expanded local government.”

Thank you once again for the opportunity to share our perspective today. Quyanapqak.