

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 24, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President, United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write out of deep concern for the health of America's Arctic; in particular, the federal portions of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas (Arctic Ocean), the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Arctic Refuge), and the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (Reserve). These resources, which belong to all Americans, are at significant risk from climate change and ill-planned industrial activity. We urge you and your administration's environmental leadership to take swift and decisive action to implement science-based precautionary management for this unique and fragile portion of our natural heritage.

The Arctic plays a vital role in global climate patterns and influences the world's weather. At the same time, no place on Earth is being more rapidly or radically impacted by climate change. Once healthy and diverse ecosystems are now in peril, and the wildlife that depend on them, including the polar bear, ribbon seal and Pacific walrus, are currently at risk. Alaska Natives who have sustained themselves from the biological resources of the Arctic environment for thousands of years are seeing their subsistence culture in danger.

The threats of global warming to the Arctic's fragile ecosystems are compounded by the growing threat of industrialization. The reduction in sea ice cover in the Arctic opens the region to an expansion of industrial activities, such as commercial shipping, oil and gas activities, and commercial fishing. The most notable and immediate industrial threat is from the aggressive and risky expansion of oil and gas activities in the region from the last eight years. Without undertaking sound planning or following informed decision-making practices, the last administration opened massive marine and terrestrial portions of America's Arctic to oil and gas activities. It ignored the absences of sound science needed to determine potential environmental and cultural impacts, and proceeded despite the lack of effective oil spill recovery technology. In addition, with further industrial activity in the Arctic will come increased emissions of pollutants that will exacerbate the problems of climate change, including the accelerating retreat of sea ice.

We commend Secretary of the Interior Salazar for his plans to prepare a comprehensive offshore energy strategy that will be open, inclusive, based on sound science, and be integrated with a national energy plan. In addition to offering our assistance on that effort, we also make the following recommendations:

- Establish an inter-agency Task Force to develop a comprehensive conservation and energy plan for America's Arctic, based on sound science, to guide our decisions about if, when, where, and how industrial activities should be permitted in the Arctic.
- Support the strongest possible protection for the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, including wilderness designation legislation.
- Close the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area in the Reserve to further oil and gas leasing, support legislation to permanently withdraw that area from mineral leasing laws, and study other priority conservation areas within the Reserve for potential protection.
- Initiate a comprehensive scientific assessment of Arctic ecosystems to provide the sound science needed for a comprehensive plan, to be conducted by an independent and expert entity.
- Pending completion of the comprehensive plan, take a precautionary approach to managing the Arctic by suspending the expansion of industrial activity, including offshore oil and gas leasing, exploration and development (including such activities initiated and approved by the Bush Administration), additional shipping, commercial fishing, and mining.

In short, we urge you to use a precautionary approach in managing human activities in America's Arctic. By working together, and using sound, inclusive, and open decision-making procedures, we can find the appropriate balance in America's Arctic between resource protection and exploitation, and demonstrate to Americans and the world that we can responsibly address the challenges we face today.

Sincerely yours,



Jay Inslee
Member of Congress

Edward J. Markey
Member of Congress

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

Nick J. Rahall
Member of Congress

Henry A. Waxman
Member of Congress

Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

George Miller
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Maurice D. Hinchey
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