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Public sends BLM more than 100 written comments during NPR-A scoping period

Planning/EIS team also hears many public concerns at five scoping meetings

Every plan must start somewhere, and the BLM's first step in drafting an Integrated Activity Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (IAP/EIS) for the Northeast Planning Area of the NPR-A was to define current and potential problems, concerns and issues. To do this, the BLM held public meetings in the three communities most likely to be affected by activities in the 4.6-million-acre planning area: Nuiqsut, Atkasuk and Barrow. Two other meetings were held in the major population centers of the state, Fairbanks and Anchorage.

The BLM also asked for written comments from anyone interested in the study area and established an Internet web site for the NPR-A, with a page for public comments.

The scoping phase of the planning process was critical for identifying issues and concerns people have about the management of public lands. The issues brought forward in the scoping process will be considered by the NPR-A Planning Team and incorporated into the integrated activity plan and the environmental impact statement.

The BLM recorded many issues and concerns as team members talked to more than 150 people who attended the scoping meetings during March and April. One hundred and one written comments have been received by the BLM.

The official public scoping period ended April 18, 1997; however, BLM Alaska State Director Tom Allen says, "We will continue to accept input from the public throughout this process, so everyone who wants to will have a voice in the final integrated activity plan and environmental impact statement."

Comments were received from village, city, borough, state and federal agencies; environmental groups, petroleum and mining interests, Native and tribal

entities, and the general public. The level of detail ranged from expressing general concerns to making specific recommendations and providing detailed scientific data, references and traditional knowledge.

There were several categories of concerns, including the planning process itself, subsistence, fish and wildlife, cultural resources, lands, mineral resources, recreation and scenic values, socioeconomics, and environmental quality.

Major concerns

The most consistent concern expressed at all public meetings and in most of the written comments was the fear that the 18-month planning process would not give the BLM adequate time to receive meaningful public and agency information and to compile recent research findings and traditional knowledge. For example, the community of Nuiqsut is concerned that an expedited decision made without adequate research could allow additional oil and gas exploration and development within its traditional subsistence use areas with less-than-favorable consequences.

Another frequent comment was that a comprehensive, cumulative impact assessment of all past, present and proposed oil and gas development and other land use activities on the North Slope should be included in the EIS. Some people said that available data are inadequate to thoroughly assess potential impacts on natural and cultural resources or to develop effective mitigation measures to protect resource values. In contrast, several commenters expressed confidence that given the petroleum industry's advanced drilling technology and current environmental standards, oil and gas development can be compatible with conserving surface resource values and subsistence opportunities.

Several commenters expressed concern that previously reported comments by Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt indicated a biased, predetermined outcome, contrary to the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Some segments of the public think the nation lacks a national energy policy and there is no demonstrated need for producing additional oil and gas resources, given current low prices and the ability to export domestic oil. They view the NPR-A as a "rainy day" reserve account and worry that critical wildlife habitat, subsistence use areas and scenic qualities could be traded for short-term economic gains.

Another widely addressed issue dealt with protection of surface resource values within the Teshekpuk Lake and Colville River special areas, which were

designated by the Secretary of the Interior to recognize crucial habitats for black brant and Arctic peregrine falcon, as well as for other migratory birds, caribou and moose.

Commenters urged the BLM to apply stipulations and mitigative measures as a way of minimizing impacts, to adjust special area boundaries to include other resources or unique areas such as the Pik sand dunes or subsistence camps, to legislatively designate special areas as national conservation system units, or to close the special areas to oil and gas development. While most North Slope commenters support full protection of these resources, they oppose legislative designations that increase restrictions on subsistence uses and access.

North Slope concerns

North Slope communities feel the most critical management issue for them is subsistence. While these communities benefit from oil and gas development and are interested in further development, the Inupiaq people rely on access to traditional areas and use of resources to preserve their cultural heritage and provide their livelihood. These commenters told the BLM that exploration and development activities should minimize displacement of fish and wildlife, including caribou, waterfowl, furbearers and marine mammals. Development should also allow subsistence hunters to move about freely to reach their traditional use areas.

One recommendation presented by North Slope communities and organizations was to establish a "subsistence review panel" comprised of local residents. This panel would work directly with BLM and the oil industry to review land use proposals and to resolve conflicts that arise between subsistence activities and oil exploration and development activities.

Several residents of North Slope villages expressed concern about trespass problems on Native allotments. North Slope entities requested that the certification process be completed on pending allotments before any leasing occurs, and suggested updating land status maps to educate industry about the location of private lands within NPR-A. The village corporation in Nuiqsut, the Kuukpik Corporation, opposes leasing activity on lands within their entitlement area around the village. The corporation must select the rest of its entitlement under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act from this area, and prefers that no leasing take place on land that may eventually belong to the village corporation.

Other concerns

Several commenters and organizations mentioned that recreational values and roadless, scenic and wilderness qualities of NPR-A should be protected by legislative designation of a national conservation system unit, or by not offering the affected area for oil and gas leasing. The Colville River, in particular, was identified for its remote river-floating opportunities.

Oil industry representatives stated that oil and gas development does not exclude protection of surface resource values. They noted that modern operations impact the environment far less than in the past, due to improved technology and stiffer stipulations on how they operate. Oil interests also advocated technical ways in which BLM's leasing program could be structured to make development most efficient. Those include suggestions for maximum leasing tract size (5,760 acres), having minimum bids of less than \$25 per acre, unification of leases, timely lease sales, and allowing extension of lease terms when waiting for the development of transportation facilities.

Other mineral organizations expressed interest in opening the NPR-A to exploration and development of hard rock mineral resources.

Several issues regarding environmental quality were also raised. Air quality on the North Slope has diminished, especially in winter around Nuiqsut, and respiratory problems are perceived to be a result of North Slope oil production operations. Known contamination sites need to be cleaned up, and oil spill prevention and response plans must adequately address potential problems and minimize impacts on water quality and fish habitat.

Commenters frequently expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to comment on the planning effort. BLM officials and the planning team said they are very thankful for the insights offered by all parties and look forward to more discussions on the future management of the Northeast Planning Area of the NPR-A.

-Sharon Wilson

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NPR-A science symposium brings latest information to planning team

More than 130 people filled the room at the Anchorage Sheraton Hotel April 16-18 to hear experts present the latest information about topics such as wildlife, subsistence uses and archaeological resources in the NPR-A planning area.

The meeting, organized by the Minerals Management Service (MMS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to help the planning team, also drew a lot of interest from the public. More than two dozen presentations were scheduled during the three-day event.

The symposium focused special attention on oil and gas activities and their potential impacts on resources in the planning area. In the opening session, oil industry representatives described typical North Slope oil and gas operations. Harry Brower, Jr., of the North Slope Borough and Thomas Napageak of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission participated in a session on North Slope village subsistence.

Scientists from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, University of Alaska, North Slope Borough, Ducks Unlimited and several federal agencies shared their knowledge on paleontological and archaeological discoveries, rare plants, waterfowl, caribou, polar bears and fish.

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° A special BLM Geographic Information System (GIS) team has acquired a large amount of useful resource information from the North Slope Borough and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The GIS team has digitized much of this information plus dozens of maps showing data such as raptor nesting locations, caribou calving areas, lakes, rivers and coast line. They have also digitized Native allotment parcels from Master Title Plats.

° A complete transcript of the scoping comments is available for review at the BLM public inquiries rooms in Fairbanks and Anchorage. Copies were sent to Atkasuk, Barrow and Nuiqsut.

° The State of Alaska has designated Johanna Munson as their project liaison. She will work closely with the NPR-A teams and report progress directly to Alaska DNR Deputy Commissioner Marty Rutherford. Her office is located at the BLM's Alaska State Office in Anchorage.

° An interagency group of biologists gathered in Fairbanks May 21 and 22 to discuss potential stipulations and other mitigation measures to reduce impacts on waterfowl and caribou. Mitigation measures will be incorporated in the plan alternatives and will be considered with information about oil and gas potential.

° The next issue of the NPR-A Report, scheduled for July, will bring news on the development of the alternatives that will be analyzed in the environmental impact statement.

° For more information on the NPR-A, visit the BLM Internet Home Page
<http://aurora.ak.blm.gov/npra/>).

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North Slope Borough helps BLM produce bilingual NPR-A maps

Information obtained during a North Slope Borough multi-year project to have Inupiat elders identify place names in their Native language has been made available to

BLM will combine this new information with existing information to produce bilingual maps for NPR-A and possibly the rest of the North Slope, beginning at a scale of 1:2 million. One or more additional series at a greater level of detail will eventually be produced as well, probably at a scale of 1:250,000.

The maps will be produced individually on plotters in BLM's Branch of Mapping Sciences and will have a wide variety of applications. For example, a working set should be available for the next NPR-A public meetings scheduled for late this year. BLM resource specialists conducting field visits for surveys or Native allotment field exams will also find these maps to be a valuable tool.

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Tract Evaluation Studies in Progress

The Tract Evaluation Team, composed of geologists from BLM and MMS, is developing oil and gas resource estimates for the planning area. They are also developing a 'reasonable foreseeable development' analysis to be used in the plan.

The geologists develop their estimates by reprocessing old data acquired by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) or supplied by industry during earlier leasing programs. "BLM is also buying more recent data obtained for areas outside NPR-A that can tie in with this information," said geologist Art Banet. USGS in Denver is reprocessing about 500 miles of seismic data for the team and will provide future consultative services according to tract evaluation team leader Joe Dygas.

The tract evaluation team is also studying a list of areas that are likely exploration target areas.

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Important dates in NPRA planning schedule

1997

May /June Develop initial management alternatives

October Draft environmental impact statement (EIS) available

Nov. Dec. Public hearings and comment period on draft EIS

1998

June Final EIS published

July Final decision document

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