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More than 7,000 comments received

## Public Reviews Draft EIS

The 90-day comment period for BLM's Draft Integrated Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the of the National Petroleum Reserve ended March 12.

"We are very grateful to all those who took the time to testify, write, fax or e-mail us with their comments said BLM Alaska State Director Tom Allen. "We received more than 7,000 comments, which is a lot compared to what we have done in the past. Many comments were well reasoned, thoughtful and helpful. We will use the information to develop the preferred alternative for the final EIS," said Allen.

Jim Ducker, who coordinated the distribution of the comments to the planning team, said "We received comments throughout the entire comment period. Each comment was reviewed by at least two people, and usually by questions and comments about our description of the environment went to team specialists for analysis. They are incorporating the comments into the plan as appropriate."

Hearings to gather oral comments were held in January on the North Slope in the villages of Barrow, Nuiqsut, Wainwright; in interior Alaska at Fairbanks and Anaktuvuk Pass; and in Anchorage. Two additional hearings were held in San Francisco and Washington, D. C. to allow people living outside of Alaska an opportunity to make their comments.

This was the first time that BLM-Alaska promoted the use of the Internet to send comments electronically. In total, that BLM received 500 comments on the NPR-A website or by e-mail.

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## Comments and More Comments

According to Jim Ducker, who processed all the comments sent to the Planning/EIS team, "We received many interesting comments from individuals in all walks of life and all age groups. We received letters from students across the country at all grade levels, from fourth graders in Wisconsin to junior and senior high school students, to university students seemingly from everywhere." Responses came from every state in the union.

The Wilderness Society ran a full page ad in The New York Times with a special coupon to clip and mail that opposed leasing.

A number of commentators stated that the alternatives lacked variety. Many people wanted BLM to develop and analyze a "conservation alternative" that would include permanent protection for Teshekpuk Lake and the Colville River through a special designation. Others questioned why there was no preferred alternative specified and requested that a supplemental draft Plan/EIS with a preferred alternative be released for comment prior to developing the final EIS.

The State of Alaska and the North Slope Borough developed and submitted their own preferred alternatives.



Commentors generally in favor of leasing stated that it takes up to ten years to find and develop an oilfield, that it is unwise to depend on so much imported oil, and that improved industry practices would minimize impacts to fish, birds and the local culture.

Individuals generally opposed to leasing questioned the need for the oil (as reflected in current low prices) and cited the petroleum reserve's high wildlife values, particularly Teshekpuk Lake for waterfowl and caribou, and the Colville River for peregrine falcon. North Slope villagers expressed concerns related to the impacts of development on subsistence, particularly access, cabins, Native allotments, campsites, cultural sites and traditional use areas. Many North Slope commentors stated that they did not want any permanent designations for particular areas. Others wanted more information on how the local people could be assured of employment opportunities.

Here are some selected expressions of interest...

- "It is not virgin wilderness but has been subjected to past explorations in the 1940s and 1950s and again in the 70s and 80s..."
- "The oil is not going anywhere. We can get it in 20 years or 100 years if we really think we want it. But once we destroy the wilderness, it is gone forever. Extinct species never come back."
- "Your recommendations for permanent withdrawals or exclusions of lands from leasing should be eliminated from the EIS. Basin-wide access is needed in the Reserve in order to conduct thorough and technically-sufficient exploratory programs. Once oil is located, then exclusion provisions can become part of drilling programs."
- "Since it takes ten years or more from leasing time to oil production, it should start very soon to protect the USA from having another oil shortage."
- "There are many new sources of petroleum coming on line from Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea area, China, etc. that equate to more than adequate supplies for some time to come. Thus there is no need to imperil the unique wilderness and other natural resources of this area."
- "The US will not receive a decent price for these reserves now; the price of oil is weak and looking weaker. Better to hold on for a spell and sell when the price is high. That way, we the public will make more money... A responsible manager would not squander a valuable resource by selling at a dip in price."

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## **What's a Comment?**

Many of the 7,000 written comments were identical statements prompted by mail-in campaigns by various organizations.

BLM received preprinted postcard returns from members and supporters of the Alaska Center for the Environment and Sierra Club (350), Audubon Society (275), the Wilderness Society and Alaska Wilderness League (2,950). A form letter campaign organized by the Natural Resources Defense Council prompted 900 responses, and a newspaper ad in the New York Times yielded another 80 responses.

Industry and labor groups organized supporters of oil leasing who sent in 300 signed copies of form letters. Other mail-in campaigns produced smaller numbers of identical responses.

After accounting for identical comments, there were 2,043 'unique' written responses. Many of these comments repeated points made by others.

All written responses and the hearing transcripts were reviewed by the BLM and MMS specialists who identified comments that required a response. These are comments that "are substantive and related to inadequacies or inaccuracies in the analysis or methodologies used; identify new impacts or recommend reasonable new alternatives or mitigation measures; or involve substantive disagreements on interpretations of significance."

The Final Plan/EIS will address the concerns expressed and incorporate additional information provided by the commentors.

Thanks to all who participated.

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## **Bethel subsistence hearing gathers comments on waterfowl migration**

Ruth Nukapigak, who co-captains a whaling crew with her son, gives her comments to BLM.

The BLM held a Subsistence Hearing in Bethel, Alaska, May 12 as required by Title 8 of ANILCA. The hearing followed open houses in Hooper Bay and Bethel, where BLM staff answered questions regarding migratory waterfowl that molt in the Northeast Planning Area of the NPR-A. The hearing supplemented the Section 810 subsistence hearings held as part of the public hearings during the comment period.

Waterfowl that live in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta part of the year are a prized food for the people of this coastal area, and many of the waterfowl fly to the North Slope to molt in mid-summer.

Myron Naneng, president of the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), asked the BLM to hold the subsistence hearing so local people could express their concerns about how activities on the North Slope might affect their subsistence resources: the migratory waterfowl that use both areas. Based in Bethel, the AVCP represents 56 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

Seventeen people from Bethel and outlying villages attended the meeting, and 13 testified. Comments ranged from wanting no leasing in NPR-A to supporting the North Slope Borough's position of allowing development in parts of the planning area.

The North Slope Borough (NSB) sent three representatives to the hearing. After listening to local comments, Taqulik Hepa of the NSB recommended in her testimony that a Y-K Delta representative become a member of the subsistence review panel recommended by North Slope villages as a way to oversee NPR-A oil operations. Hepa also recommended that a Y-K Delta contingent travel to the North Slope to view improved drilling techniques in the oilfields and the waterfowl molting areas.

The subsistence hearing ended on a positive note, with Inupiat Eskimo from the north and Yupik Eskimo from the south building a bridge of understanding across the 1,200 air miles that separate them. They agreed that the two groups should work together for the good of the land, the resources and the Alaska Native peoples.

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## Key dates coming up

July 3, 1998

Final Plan/EIS sent to printer

July 31, 1998

Final Plan/EIS published; mailout begins. Document also posted on internet.

January 1998

Comment period closes

August 1998

Final record of decision document released.

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