

# Indigenous peoples' dissenting views on Arctic drilling fuels debate

December 12 2023, by David Jordan, CQ-Roll Call

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Members of Congress agree that the administration needs to consider the concerns of indigenous communities when taking actions on oil and gas leasing in the Arctic. There is just disagreement on whose concerns

should be prioritized.

The Biden [administration](#)'s slate of actions announced in September included canceling the remaining oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge issued under President Donald Trump and proposing new protections for over 13 million acres in the neighboring National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

These proposals drew condemnation from many Republicans—already critical of the Biden administration's leasing policies—that the moves will increase U.S. dependence of foreign sources of oil. Alaska's congressional delegation, which includes Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola, said the administration ignored the wishes of those on the ground.

These frustrations were on display when the House Natural Resources Committee approved a bill that would prohibit the Biden administration from enforcing these actions. The bill was introduced by Rep. Pete Stauber, R-Minn., and co-sponsored by Peltola, who was the only Democrat to vote in favor.

The bill also had support from Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation and Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope. At a Nov. 29 hearing, Doreen Leavitt, director of natural resources for the latter group, said their voices had been "continually dismissed" as the Biden administration considers the fate of drilling in the region.

In their Dec. 7 comments on the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska proposal, ICAS, the North Slope Borough and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation expressed many of the same concerns.

"[The Bureau of Land Management] is failing to fulfill its broader duties to Congress and the indigenous people of the North Slope by capitulating to a political agenda that calls for ending domestic oil and gas

development with no regard to the economic and national security consequences of those actions," the comments said.

Other Democratic members of the committee, though, spoke of their concerns that oil and [gas development](#) in the region would both be a major source of emissions and threaten the way of life of the Gwich'in people who depend on the region's caribou herds for subsistence.

Gwich'in representatives from Alaska and Canada were in Washington last week to urge expanded protections for the region. In a statement the Gwich'in Steering Committee said that during the trip it shared "as we have many times in the past that protecting the Arctic Refuge is not just about protecting land: it is about respecting our rights as Indigenous Peoples."

"Future generations deserve assurance from the US government that our culture, traditions, and connections to our sacred land and its animals will not be infringed on," the committee said.

Ranking member Raúl M. Grijalva, D-Ariz., expressed his own concerns that opponents of the drilling did not have their concerns adequately addressed under the Trump administration when it moved to finalize the leases.

In their comments on the NPR-A proposal, [environmental groups](#) including the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society and the Northern Alaska Environmental Center encourage stricter protections for the region.

"The lands and waters of the Reserve are globally unique ecosystems and culturally irreplaceable for the Alaska Native communities who live within the region and rely on its resources," the groups wrote.

"As the Biden Administration looks to fulfill its ambitious, yet necessary domestic and [international commitments](#) toward environmental justice, climate action, and the protection of biodiversity, the Reserve offers a tremendous opportunity for addressing their goals."

But for the groups that would see the most immediate economic benefits from drilling in the region, the development represents a way to support some of the most remote communities in the nation.

"I think that there is a lack of understanding just because they talk about subsistence and they talk about protecting the land and the animals for the people that are there," said Nagruk Harcharek, president of the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat. "But if you're threatening our economic base you're in turn indirectly limiting our ability to subsist."

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Citation: Indigenous peoples' dissenting views on Arctic drilling fuels debate (2023, December 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-indigenous-peoples-dissenting-views-arctic.html>

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