

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Alaska Wilderness League * Defenders of Wildlife * Earthjustice
Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition * Native Movement * Native Peoples Action
Northern Alaska Environmental Center * The Wilderness Society**

Groups Condemn BLM's Decision to Hold Untimely and Inaccessible Virtual Meetings

The Bureau of Land Management continues to hold inaccessible “virtual meetings” on oil and gas extraction projects in Arctic Alaska despite multiple requests for the suspension of public comment periods and permitting processes during this pandemic. As advocates for environmental justice, Indigenous rights, and transparent public process, our coalition condemns the agency’s conduct in proceeding with these virtual meetings during a time when communities across Alaska are focusing on keeping people healthy, fed and safe.

BLM has used this global health crisis to further enact systemic racism and inequities in the decision-making process around Alaska’s lands, waters and people, by holding virtual hearings on the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) on the Willow Master Development Plan. This plan is a massive network of proposed oil infrastructure on the North Slope. If built, the project will impact critical wildlife habitat across Alaska’s Arctic, and pose significant threat to the Southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population and migratory birds. The process deliberately silenced and excluded the voices who most need to be at the table when decisions about the North Slope are made. By denying requests for suspension, this has further traumatized Alaska Native communities in the region.

Following the release of the SEIS, the agency held virtual meetings via Zoom beginning on April 16 and live streamed them on Facebook. BLM removed the recorded Facebook videos immediately afterward.

The vast majority of participants at these meetings joined from relatively urban places in Alaska, testifying in solidarity with those in North Slope communities, many of whom do not have access to adequate phone or internet services to participate.

“We are experiencing generational trauma, following the losses of the 1918 flu,” said Siqiñiq Maupin, whose family is from Nuiqsut. “This pandemic threatens to devastate our people and our culture. The North Slope Borough has declared an emergency. I am worried about the safety of my family. For BLM to continue ‘business as usual’ is unacceptable.”

During the first Zoom hearings, people spoke about the trauma and stress of taking time to attend a Zoom meeting to defend their homelands from further threat when basic supplies like food and diapers are scarce.

“I’m shaking with anger that we have to spend our time calling in when people are fighting to survive,” said Charlene Apok, speaking through tears with her young child audible in the background. “You all should be ashamed.”

During the April 23 hearing, Martha Itta of Nuiqsut said, “There are so many people —elders—who want to participate but can’t because they don’t have the technology. I want the world to know that.”

BLM failed to answer questions during the hearings, or acknowledge or show concern about the inability of people to participate because of phone service or online access, and the stress and workload of preparing for and responding to the pandemic. During the April 23 meeting, even agency representatives were experiencing technical challenges, and were dropped off the call and unable to cohesively manage the platform.

The agency spokesperson touted the number of people who participated in Zoom hearing without acknowledging the content of their testimony, the resounding message that these unethical processes must stop, or the fact that most of the people participating did not or were not allowed to speak. BLM also failed to address the fact that true and robust public engagement requires that people are allowed to communicate in their own communities and in ways best suited to their needs.

The “virtual public process” required signing up in advance despite so many people having limited access to public notices or news, or adequate broadband or phone service; it required that participants have the time and space to attend, though so many Alaskans have neither at the moment while taking care of their families and communities while hunkered down; it gave the agency complete control over who could speak, when they could speak, and what questions got answered, and essentially silenced some people by isolating and ignoring their written questions and comments in Zoom and on the Facebook feed.

The final meetings will be held on Wednesday, April 29, at 1 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

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