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**NATIVE AND CONSERVATION GROUPS VOICE OPPOSITION
TO LEASE SALE 193 IN THE CHUKCHI SEA**

Arctic Oil and Gas Lease Sale Moves Forward Despite Science and Agencies' Opposition

Washington, DC – Today, Alaska Native and conservation groups voiced their opposition to Department of Interior's (DOI) controversial Lease Sale 193, comprising nearly 30 million acres of pristine waters in the Chukchi Sea of Alaska. The Chukchi Sea is critical habitat for polar bears, walrus, whales, seals, and migratory birds and is experiencing some of the most rapid loss of sea ice in the world due to global warming. Minerals Management Service (MMS), an agency within the DOI, announced its intention to sell oil and gas leases in this critical part of the Arctic Ocean on January 2. Less than one week after that announcement, a different DOI agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), announced it would miss a legally required January 9 deadline for making its final decision on whether to list polar bears as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Polar bear populations are predicted to decline significantly as a result of the drastic impacts of global warming on the bear's habitat in the Chukchi Sea and across America's Arctic. As a result of FWS' delay, this lease sale is taking place before the ESA listing decision, allowing MMS to sell off polar bear habitat to the oil and gas industry without adhering to the protections of the ESA.

"When the best science tells us that polar bears are in trouble because of global warming, it makes no sense for the DOI to further imperil them by rushing to lease a major portion of their habitat for oil and gas development," said David Dickson, Western Arctic Wilderness and Oceans Program Director for Alaska Wilderness League. "By their own admission MMS and FWS stated that a large oil spill could pose a significant risk to the polar bear population and MMS estimates a 40 percent chance of an oil spill. Secretary Kempthorne should withdraw this lease sale."

Among the parties who have questioned MMS' plans to move forward with this sale despite the serious gaps in necessary information are U.S. senators, representatives, Alaskan Natives, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the American public.

"The Chukchi Sea is our garden. We've hunted and fished in the ocean for thousands of years," said Jack Schaefer, President of the tribal council of the Native Village of Point Hope. "The ocean is what our history and culture is based on. We can't afford to stop our religious, cultural and subsistence activities that depend on the ocean. One oil spill could destroy our way of life," said Schaefer.

"According to the final environmental impact statement for Lease Sale 193, MMS estimates a 40 percent chance of a major crude oil spill," Pamela Miller of Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

"The decision to move forward with this lease sale reflects the inability of the DOI to integrate and resolve the differing missions of its own agencies," said Stan Senner, executive director of the National Audubon Society's Alaska office. "Unfortunately, the decision to move forward with this lease sale places the people, wildlife and water of the Arctic at risk."

"The Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope is the regional tribal government for eight villages on the North Slope. We have a responsibility to our people to stand up against threats to our whaling culture and to protect our way of life. An oil spill in the Chukchi Sea could devastate the bowhead whale migration and other animals we have subsisted on for thousands of years. MMS continues to ignore our concerns.

The elders have spoken and told us to fight this and we will do so through this lawsuit,” said George Edwardson, President of the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS).

“From Alaska to Norway to South Korea, we’ve seen time and again that the technology to contain an oil spill at sea does not yet exist,” said Margaret Williams, Managing Director of World Wildlife Fund’s Bering Sea program. “One spill could spell disaster not only for polar bears, but for the entire ecosystem on which Native Alaskan communities depend. The bottom line: oil and polar bears don’t mix. By moving forward with this lease sale, Secretary Kempthorne is casting a pall over the future of both polar bears and one of the last truly pristine parts of America.”

According to estimates from the Army Corps of Engineers’ final environmental impact statement for the Northstar Project, “cleanup responses to spills would be hampered or prevented for over 50 percent of the year in Arctic waters.”

“It is unacceptable to have such conflicting activities come out of two agencies that both report to the DOI,” said Trish Rolfe, Alaska Representative for Sierra Club. “By moving forward with drilling, Secretary Kempthorne is condemning our pristine public waters and the Native communities who subsist on them to an uncertain future. The decision to allow drilling in the Chukchi Sea makes a mockery of the interagency consultation and oversight that is supposed to take place when it comes to managing our public lands and waters,” said Rolfe.

“REDOIL (Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands) supports the subsistence rights of Inupiat communities. We strongly feel that the communities that rely on the Chukchi Sea for their subsistence livelihood have been overlooked in the Lease Sale 193 decision,” said Faith Gemmill, Campaign Organizer of REDOIL, a grassroots Alaska Native organization. “We are very disappointed that MMS is moving forward with this sale in direct opposition to requests from Inupiat communities who have expressed their concerns for the habitat of the polar bear and walrus which the Inupiat have noted.”

“This lease sale ignores explicit recommendations from scientists to call off this lease sale due to the harm activities would pose to marine mammals such as the polar bear, which call these waters home,” said Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife.

“The people of TIKIGAQ (traditional name for the people of Point Hope) have hunted and depended on the animals that migrate through the Chukchi Sea for thousands of years. This is our garden, our identity, our livelihood. Without it we would not be who we are today. Even at this present day and time the animals from these waters shelter, clothe, and feed us. We would be greatly impacted if anything happened to our ocean and the animals that migrate through the Chukchi Sea. We oppose any activity that will endanger our way of life and the animals that we greatly depend on,” said Steve Oomittuk, Point Hope City Mayor.

“The federal government is sacrificing the arctic for the sake of oil development,” said Michael LeVine, Oceana’s Pacific Counsel and Senior Advisor. “At best, the government has conflicting activities coming from two agencies reporting to the same department. There is no conflict, however, with the scientific evidence showing that the climate is changing faster than we thought and affecting the Arctic waters and the Native communities who depend on them. This is about more than just polar bears. It is about an important and poorly understood ecosystem and the people who are entirely dependent on it.”

“The Chukchi Sea must be protected as critical habitat for the polar bear, not auctioned off to the highest oil company bidder,” said Kassie Siegel, Climate Program Director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Hearings have been held in both the Senate and the House of Representatives to uncover the known and unknown effects oil and gas development in the pristine Arctic Ocean would have on the survival of imperiled polar bear populations – as well as other species already suffering as a result of rapid sea ice melt. The Director of FWS, Dale Hall, testified before the Senate Environment and Public Works

Committee last Wednesday and heads of both MMS and FWS testified in the House Select Committee on Global Warming and Energy Independence on January 17.

A coalition made up of the Native Village of Point Hope, the City of Point Hope, the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, REDOIL (Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands), Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Oceana, Pacific Environment, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society filed suit in federal district court in Alaska on January 31, arguing that in making its decision to hold today's lease sale, MMS did not adequately weigh the impacts oil and gas activities would have on wildlife like polar bears, or on native villages along Alaska's North Slope. The organizations are being represented by Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm.

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* For more information on this hearing and access materials, maps, photos on this issue, go to media.alaskacoalition.org.

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