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In Unilateral NPR-A Decision, Biden Administration Continues Trend of Silencing Indigenous Elected Leaders

The federal government's NPR-A rule was crafted without engaging local communities or consulting Indigenous elected leaders – and will roll back decades of progress for the North Slope Iñupiat.

Anchorage, AK – Today, Indigenous elected leaders from Alaska's North Slope are unified in their outrage over the Biden administration's decision to advance its September 2023 Proposed Rule from the Department of Interior (DOI) to "protect" 13 million acres of our ancestral homelands and waters located within the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) from the very people that live there. The federal government's unilateral mandates will stymy decades of progress for the Indigenous North Slope Iñupiat, who have stewarded their homelands, which completely encompass the NPR-A, for over 10,000 years.

"The federal government has again excluded the Indigenous North Slope Iñupiat from policymaking by issuing a final rule for the NPR-A that does not reflect our communities' wishes," said **Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat President Nagruk Harcharek**. "This is a deeply concerning trend by an administration that regularly claims to be the most Indigenous friendly government on record. Yet, this administration's record does not live up to its own rhetoric. As a result, the final NPR-A rule will hurt the very residents the federal government purports to help by rolling back years progress, impoverishing our communities, and imperiling our Iñupiaq culture. To quote one of our 20th century leaders, 'There's not much you can do when your own government says shut up. It hurts.'"

Over 95% of the North Slope's tax revenue is derived from taxation on resource development infrastructure. These funds support essential services, like schools, health clinics, modern water and sewer systems, and world-class wildlife management and research supporting Indigenous subsistence traditions. The proliferation of these services is directly connected to significant increases in average lifespan for the North Slope Iñupiat from just 34 years in 1969 to 77 years today – the largest increase of its kind in the United States over that period.

"The DOI seems to believe that they care about this land more than we do," said **North Slope Borough Mayor Josiah Patkotak**. "The elected leaders of the North Slope spoke in unison in opposition to this rule and the rulemaking process. To refuse to listen to our voices is to say that you know better - better than the people who have been this land's stewards for the past 10,000 years, and who depend on its continued health for their own survival. We deserve the same right to economic prosperity and essential services as the rest of this country and are being denied the opportunity to take care of our residents and community with this decision. It is insulting and,

unfortunately, representative of the federal government's treatment of our Indigenous voices for decades."

The North Slope Iñupiat were not consulted by federal officials prior to the Proposed Rule's announcement in September 2023 and learned of the new restrictions through the media. By excluding regional Indigenous communities from the policymaking table, the administration produced a deeply flawed rule that will impose dire economic consequences on the North Slope Iñupiat's communities and culture.

"On multiple occasions, the elected leadership of the North Slope shared with administration officials our unified opposition to this rule," said **Arctic Slope Regional Corporation** **President and CEO Rex A. Rock, Sr.** "The Administration has chosen to ignore the consensus opinion of Indigenous organizations from our region. As stewards of the Arctic for millennia, the North Slope Iñupiat know our lands better than anyone else. Alongside our region's tribes, local governments, and Alaska Native village corporations, we will continue to fight to have our voices heard."

Local Indigenous elected leaders made every effort to highlight the negative repercussions of the Proposed Rule to the White House and the DOI, but they were stonewalled repeatedly by federal officials more concerned with advancing their proposal than listening to the legitimate concerns of Indigenous people. DOI Secretary Deb Haaland herself ignored or denied at least eight meeting requests from North Slope Iñupiat elected leaders, including an inexcusable decision to deny a meeting during a recent multi-day trip to our home state of Alaska.

"As the North Slope's federally recognized tribe, we have experienced a severe lack of process, meaningful engagement, including a lack of notice for tribal consultation something we are still waiting for to this day," said **Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope** **Tribal Secretary Doreen Leavitt**. "As a federally recognized tribe, we are required to follow federal laws and policies when engaging in the government-to-government relationship, but this administration has failed to follow its own policies, executive orders, and department consultation guidelines."

"This rule, and the process by which it has been finalized, is a setback for Olgoonik Corporation and the future generations who intend to continue living on the lands of their ancestors in our Inupiat community of Wainwright," said **Olgoonik Corporation** **President and CEO Hugh Patkotak**, the ANCSA village corporation from Wainwright, AK and a private landowner neighboring the NPR-A. "Today's final rule was not something we asked for, wanted, or support. As the neighboring landowner to the NPR-A, we are frustrated this rule could impede responsible infrastructure and economic development opportunities. I will reiterate what I've said previously, when a government entity writes rules about the area in which our people live and subside, they must come to us first. That didn't happen here."

The 24-member Board of Directors for the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, which represents the vast majority of organizations on the North Slope, issued a resolution condemning the DOI's failure to follow its own guidelines, as well as executive orders from President Biden himself, outlining the department's legal obligation to consult with federally recognized tribes and Alaska Native Corporations on policies affecting their lands and people. Their position is shared by many

Alaskans from across the state, as exemplified by the Alaska State Legislature's recent passage of the bipartisan HJR20, which urged the federal government to reverse its September 2023 decision on the NPR-A.

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About Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat

VOICE is a nonprofit organization established in 2015 by the region's collective elected Iñupiat leadership and is dedicated to preserving and advancing North Slope Iñupiat cultural and economic self-determination. Its members include local governments, Alaska Native Corporations, federally recognized tribes, and tribal non-profits across the North Slope of Alaska. VOICE's Board of Directors previously issued a resolution in opposition to the federal government's Proposed Rule affecting the North Slope Iñupiat's ancestral homelands in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A).