

Native Village of Atqasuk

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2024

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Steve Cohn
 State Director, Alaska
 Bureau of Land Management
 Department of the Interior
 222 W 7th Avenue #13
 Anchorage, AK 99513

Re: BLM Request for Information on Special Areas within the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska

Dear Director Cohn,

As the elected President of Native Village of Atqasuk, located within the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A), I write to express our strong opposition to the creation and expansion of any Special Areas within the NPR-A, along with the accompanying Request For Information (RFI) process.

Native Village of Atqasuk is the federally recognized tribe for the community and tribal members of Atqasuk. Atqasuk is the long-established subsistence area located on the Meade River.

The presence of abandoned sod houses, an old cellar, and gravesite near the village offer evidence of long standing use and occupation of Atqasuk by the North Slope Iñupiat. Atqasuk is one of four communities located within the boundaries of the NPR-A.

The NPR-A is located entirely within the ancestral homelands of the North Slope Iñupiat, and no other communities reside in this area. Recognizing this, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) formed the "NPR-A Working Group" in 2013 to ensure that local people and their elected leadership, who are directly affected by federal management decisions, had a dedicated forum. Iñupiat communities of the North Slope, including Native Village of Atqasuk, are part of this Working Group. I represent one of the six communities eligible for NPR-A Impact Mitigation Funds, a clear acknowledgment by the BLM of who is impacted by its decisions within the NPR-A.

The BLM's RFI issued shortly after the finalization and implementation of the NPR-A Rule, is deeply troubling. Much like the flawed process which produced the NPR-A Rule, which the

BLM itself has admitted was finalized without support from the elected leadership of the Indigenous peoples in the affected areas, the RFI process is equally flawed. Native Village of Atqasuk's opposition to the NPR-A Rule and the process behind it is well-documented, including multiple resolutions from the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, of which we are a member. Atqasuk has publicly opposed the NPR-A Rule, supported litigation against it, and now opposes the RFI process.

Within days of the NPR-A Rule's implementation, the BLM announced this new initiative for expanding Special Areas within the same geographical region—our ancestral homelands. Notably, BLM staff themselves stated, "The Request for Information really at its most simplest is, again, did the BLM get it right? Or did the BLM get it wrong? With the new [NPR-A] rule." If the BLM had meaningfully engaged early and often, as they often highlight as a pillar of this Administration, with our communities during the NPR-A Rule's development, BLM would not have to be asking these questions. The lack of local buy-in speaks volumes about the NPR-A Rule's flawed process. Unfortunately, BLM has carried its flawed approach to this RFI process.

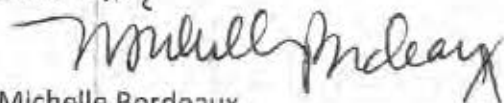
Moreover, the RFI is premature. While the BLM claims the RFI is separate from the NPR-A Rule, it affects the same lands and the legality of that Rule is currently being challenged in court.

Before the public is asked to weigh in on whether Special Areas within our ancestral homelands should be expanded or created, the ongoing litigation should be resolved. As stated, Native Village of Atqasuk supports the litigation challenging the NPR-A Rule.

The RFI process is another example of the federal government's unilateral actions on our ancestral lands under the guise of protecting the Alaska Native people and the subsistence resources they are dependent upon, which could not be further from the truth. The BLM is crowdsourcing management decisions of our ancestral homelands, while hiding behind a veil of secrecy by using an email address instead of a public docket. Even more concerning is the continued disregard for voices of the only people and elected leadership in the area who are directly impacted by these decisions.

For over a year, since September 6, 2023, we have fought for our voices to be heard on federal management decisions affecting our ancestral homelands. The BLM's consistent failure to engage with the Indigenous people and residents of Atqasuk is evident. Native Village of Atqasuk strongly opposes the RFI process and any expansion of current or creation of new Special Areas within the NPR-A, as reaffirmed by the attached Resolution 2024-03, passed by the Board of Directors of the Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat.

Sincerely,



Michelle Bordeaux
Tribal President
Native Village of Atqasuk