

August 18, 2020

Senator Richard Burr
Senator Thom Tillis
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Burr and Tillis:

As faith leaders, we are called not only to care for all of God's children and to protect God's creation but to be outspoken leaders for God's creation. We therefore call for the protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a part of God's creation that stands alone in its wilderness, ecological integrity, and beauty, from the imminent threat of oil and gas exploration and drilling.

The Refuge is an inspiring, wild landscape. It is home to polar bears, wolves, migratory birds, and a Porcupine Caribou Herd that is 180,000 strong. It's also a sacred landscape to Alaska's Indigenous Gwich'in communities, who have a spiritual connection to the refuge. The Gwich'in people, many of whom are Episcopalian, are dependent on the health of the landscape and the Porcupine caribou, which provides them a majority of their food source, to maintain their culture and way of life. The Gwich'in refer to this sacred place, the birthing grounds for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, as "Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" or "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

The exploitation of fossil fuels in the Refuge will contribute to climate change and threaten the ten thousand year-old traditions that the Gwich'in people depend upon to survive. Drilling and the related industrial infrastructure that would come with fossil fuel development would have devastating impacts. The faith community's decades long commitment to protecting the Arctic Refuge is inspired by our dedication to defending all of God's creation, including the fundamental rights of the Gwich'in people.

We have a spiritual duty to protect the Arctic Refuge for both conservation and Indigenous rights. The rush to auction off the Arctic Refuge to the oil industry has resulted in a deeply flawed process and environmental analysis with no meaningful protections for wildlife, Alaska Native cultural values and ways of life, or the area's iconic wilderness character.

Once oil exploration and drilling begins, this sacred landscape and the communities that rely upon it for survival will be harmed forever. We must demonstrate our commitment to protecting all of God's creation and living out our call for justice for God's people by calling a halt on plans to drill and conduct oil exploration in the Arctic Refuge. We have a moral obligation to promote justice, stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility.

Sincerely,

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