



Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing EIS public scoping meeting, Bureau of Land Management

Testimony by Shantha Ready Alonso, Executive Director, Creation Justice Ministries

National Housing Center at 1201 15th Street, NW

June 15, 2018 at 5:00pm

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I testify today on behalf of Creation Justice Ministries, a Christian membership organization of Orthodox, mainline Protestant, historically Black Church, Peace Church, and Baptist traditions. Through our members, we serve approximately 100,000 churches and 40 million people. In my capacity as co-chair of the Inter-religious Energy and Ecology Working Group which twice monthly convenes dozens of religious organizations engaged in public policy, I also bring concerns of Jewish, Catholic, and Evangelical partner organizations.

For decades, religious communities have advocated to protect the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from any extractive activity that could disrupt the precious ecosystems therein. This religious community advocacy priority originated through the Episcopal Church, which has a deep and special relationship with the Gwich'in Nation of Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada. More than 150 years ago, Anglican and subsequently Episcopal missionaries traveled to Fort Yukon, Alaska, to establish a mission there. Today, more than 90 percent of the Gwich'in are Episcopalian. Since 1991, the Episcopal Church has honored its General Convention Resolution to oppose oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.¹ Since the 1990s, the cause to protect the Refuge from drilling has received long-term institutional support from The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the National Council of Churches USA, and the Evangelical Environmental Network, to name a few.

Through our relationship with the Episcopal Church, many religious communities have come to understand the ecological integrity of the coastal plain as not only one of the last best intact examples of the works of the Lord, but also as essential to the religious liberty and land-based subsistence lifestyle of the Gwich'in people. For daily sustenance, the Gwich'in depend on the Porcupine caribou herd, whose birthing patterns would be disrupted by oil exploration in the Refuge, ultimately threatening the survival of both the caribou and the Gwich'in people. We understand that the porcupine caribou's birthing ground, the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, plays an important role in Gwich'in creation stories. They call the coastal plain "the sacred place where life begins." The Gwich'in believe that a bit of every human heart is in every caribou, and that a bit of caribou is in every person. Any threat to the animal is a threat to the Gwich'in. As one Gwich'in woman put it, "It is our belief that the future of the Gwich'in and the future of the caribou are the same."

It is important to note that this land is developed and it is in use – to provide grazing and birthing grounds for the caribou the Gwich'in Nation's survival depends upon. While this kind of land use

¹ Episcopal Church General Convention Resolution to Oppose Oil Development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1991-D125

does not create economic benefit for corporations or the state, it is the source of life for the Gwich'in as it has been for over 10,000 years.

There is so much more to say about the relationship between the Gwich'in and the porcupine caribou. I will submit for the record a 2005 joint report by the Gwich'in Steering Committee and The Episcopal Church, [*A Moral Choice for the United States: The Human Rights Implications for the Gwich'in of Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.*](#)²

In the past fifteen years, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, Mennonite Church USA, and others have been undergoing processes of study and repentance for Christianity's historic role in devastating Indigenous cultures, spiritualities, and the ecosystems on which they rely. As part of our repentance, we seek to rectify injustices toward Indigenous communities, and we refuse to allow perpetuation of this historical trauma. For these reasons, church communities have become more aware and forceful about our moral responsibility to protect the Gwich'in peoples' ability to culturally, spiritually, and physically rely on the bounty of the Arctic Refuge as they have for more than 10,000 years.

Most recently, in September 2017, over 120 Episcopal bishops met in Alaska to learn more and reaffirm their commitment to the Church's opposition to drilling.³ In addition, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment organized a petition calling for the strongest possible conservation protection for the Refuge, which received more than 100,000 signatures by people of faith across the United States and was submitted to Congress and the Administration in 2017. This year, another National Religious Partnership for the Environment petition specifically requests Department of Interior to refrain from allowing oil and gas leasing. It has already secured more than 17,000 signatures, most of which are from Evangelical Christians. I am submitting both petition texts for the record.

Lastly, I appeal to those who are faced with leasing decisions to consider carefully the full scope of harm that can be done to the ecological integrity of the coastal plain. This includes not only the actual drilling activities, but also seismic testing as well as the broader imposition of oil and gas infrastructure such as roads and pipelines.

Such harm to this special part of God's creation has no moral justification. The question posed today is whether or not in 2018 the United States government will make the same grave errors it did in previous centuries towards indigenous people. The Episcopal Church, Creation Justice Ministries, the Inter-religious Energy and Ecology Working Group and the millions of people of faith we represent, we urge you not to inflict such horrors again.

² A Moral Choice for the United States: Human Rights Implications for the Gwich'in of Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. 2005. <http://ourarcticrefuge.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/GSChumanrightsreport.pdf> Retrieved on June 14, 2018.

³ A Word to the Church from the Episcopal Church House of Bishops. September 27, 2017. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/word-church-episcopal-churchs-house-bishops> Retrieved on June 14, 2018

APPENDIX

*Submitted for the record with testimony of
Shantha Ready Alonso, Executive Director, Creation Justice Ministries
National Housing Center at 1201 15th Street, NW
June 15, 2018 at 4:30pm
Contact: 202-827-3975 shantha@creationjustice.org*

The below petition was delivered with more than 100,000 signatures to Congress and the Administration in 2017.

Dear Mr. President and Members of Congress:

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a part of God's creation that stands alone in its wilderness, ecological integrity, and beauty. This sacred landscape is also home of the Gwich'in, Alaska native people who depend upon the Porcupine caribou herd for their daily subsistence. The possibility of oil exploration in the Refuge jeopardizes the ecological integrity of the Refuge and the way of life of the Gwich'in people. As members of the faith community, we ask you to grant the Arctic Refuge the strongest possible protection. It is our hope that you will join us in recognizing that the precious gift of the Arctic Refuge deserves our best efforts at stewardship and preservation by permanently protecting the Refuge for this generation, and generations to come.

Sincerely,

The below petition began in January 2018 and is continuing to gather signatures at www.faithfortheartctic.org. So far, there are 17,000 signatures.

Dear Secretary Zinke:

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a part of God's creation that stands alone in its wilderness, ecological integrity, and beauty. As someone who cherishes America's wildlife and public lands, I pledge to continue to oppose drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This sacred landscape is also home of the Gwich'in, a Alaska native people who depend upon the Porcupine caribou herd for their daily subsistence. Oil exploration in the Refuge jeopardizes the ecological integrity of the Refuge and the way of life of the Gwich'in people. 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. 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.

As members of the faith community, we ask that oil and gas activities not be allowed on the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge and that the Administration not rush into leasing. It is our hope that you will join us in recognizing that such a precious gift deserves our best efforts at stewardship and preservation by doing all that you can to safeguard the renowned and sacred wilderness of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for current and future generations.

Sincerely,

Episcopal Church General Convention Resolution

Resolution Number: 1991-D125

Title: Oppose Oil Development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Legislative Action Taken: Concurred

Final Text:

Resolved, That the 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church protect the sanctity of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska by opposing the opening of this refuge for oil development; and be it further

Resolved, That the Washington Office of the Episcopal Church work toward opposing legislation that would open up the refuge, and work on behalf of legislation that would improve energy sufficiency and conservation so that drilling in this pristine area would not be necessary.

Citation: General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Phoenix, 1991* (New York: General Convention, 1992), p. 367.

A Word to the Church from the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops

September 27, 2017

The Episcopal Church House of Bishops, meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska (Diocese of Alaska) approved and presented the following Word to the Church.

A Word to the Church from The Episcopal Church's House of Bishops Gathered in Fairbanks, Alaska, September 21-26, 2017

The bishops of The Episcopal Church came to Alaska to listen to the earth and its peoples as an act of prayer, solidarity and witness. We came because:

- *"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers"* (Psalm 24:1-2). God is the Lord of all the earth and of all people; we are one family, the family of God.
- *"You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are ... members of the household of God"* (Ephesians 2:19). The residents of interior Alaska whom we met are not strangers; they are members of the same household of faith.
- People have *"become hard of hearing, and shut their eyes so that they won't see with their eyes or hear with their ears or understand with their minds, and change their*

hearts and lives that I may heal them” (Matthew 13:14-15). We are blind and deaf to the groaning of the earth and its peoples; we are learning the art of prayerful listening.

What does listening to the earth and its people mean? For us bishops, it meant:

- Getting out and walking the land, standing beside the rivers, sitting beside people whose livelihood depends on that land. We had to slow down and live at the pace of the stories we heard. We had to trust that listening is prayer.
- Recognizing that struggles for justice are connected. Racism, the economy, violence of every kind, and the environment are interrelated. We have seen this reality not only in the Arctic, but also at Standing Rock in the Dakotas, in the recent hurricanes, in Flint, Michigan, Charlottesville, Virginia, and in the violence perpetuated against people of color and vulnerable populations anywhere.
- Understanding that listening is deeply connected to healing. In many healing stories in the gospels, Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” That is, he listened first and then acted.

What did we hear?

- “The weather is really different today,” one leader told us. “Now spring comes earlier, and fall lasts longer. This is threatening our lives because the permafrost is melting and destabilizing the rivers. We depend on the rivers.”
- The land in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge where the caribou birth their calves is called the “sacred place where life begins,” so sacred the Gwich’in People do not set foot there. “Drilling here,” people said, “is like digging beneath the National Cathedral.”
- After shopping together, a native Episcopalian told one of us how hard it is to even secure food. “We can’t get good food here. We have to drive to Fairbanks. It is a two-hour trip each way.”

What we bishops saw and heard in Alaska is dramatic, but it is not unique. Stories like these can be heard in each of the nations where The Episcopal Church is present. They can be heard in our own communities. We invite you to join us, your bishops, and those people already engaged in this work, in taking time to listen to people in your dioceses and neighborhoods. Look for the connections among race, violence of every kind, economic disparity, and the environment. Then, after reflecting in prayer and engaging with scripture, partner with people in common commitment to the healing of God’s world.

God calls us to listen to each other with increased attention. It is only with unstopped ears and open eyes that our hearts and lives will be changed. It is through the reconciling love of God in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that we and the earth itself will be healed.

A Prayer for Our Time and for the Earth

Dear God, Creator of the earth, this sacred home we share;

Give us new eyes to see the beauty all around and to protect the wonders of creation.

Give us new arms to embrace the strangers among us and to know them as family.

Give us new ears to hear and understand those who live off the land

and to hear and understand those who extract its resources.

Give us new hearts to recognize the brokenness in our communities

and to heal the wounds we have inflicted.

Give us new hands to serve the earth and its people

and to shape beloved community.

For you are the One who seeks the lost,

binds our wounds and sets us free,

and it is in the name of Jesus the Christ we pray.

Amen.