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Northern Alaska Environmental Center's Position on
National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska
Approved 12/9/2003

The Northern Alaska Environmental Center believes that current development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPRA) must be evaluated for the total environmental, social and economic cumulative impacts to this rich and diverse area. In addition, the public must be fully informed and involved in the evaluation and all resulting land use decisions.

At 23.5 million acres, the NPRA is the largest single administrative unit of undeveloped land in the nation. It is a graceful landscape of mountains, foothills, coastal plain, lagoons, and arctic coastline—wilderness with exceptional opportunities for solitude and personal exploration in a setting of exceptional natural and cultural values. It encompasses the Colville River, America's largest arctic river system, and includes the calving grounds and summer range for two caribou herds, one of which, the Western Arctic Herd, is America's largest (greater than 400,000 animals). The NPRA contains the highest breeding densities of peregrines, gyrfalcons, and rough-legged hawks in North America. Over 5 million waterfowl and shorebirds nest there annually. The reserve has what is believed to be the highest existing wolverine population density in the world. Other significant features include rare fossil beds containing North America's northern-most dinosaur remains; and among the oldest archaeological evidence in Beringia of human cultures that depended on large Pleistocene mammals.

The Reserve was originally established in 1923, between the world wars, as a strategic petroleum source in case of a national military emergency. At that time it was called the Naval Petroleum Reserve Number 4. Today, petroleum reserves as exist in the NPRA are no longer considered vital for military defense. The Northern Center believes that current and future management of NPRA must balance oil, gas, and other mineral development with conservation and protection of fish, wildlife, and their habitat, as well as cultural, archaeological, paleontological, and wilderness values, as mandated by Congress in the 1976 legislation that established the Preserve in its present form.



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A thorough environmental, social and economic assessment before any new leasing or development occurs must include a comprehensive identification and mapping of the critical fish and wildlife habitats, cultural and historic sites, and outstanding wilderness areas. The new resources assessment should inform management actions that will result in permanent protection through designation of certain areas of the NPRA as refuge or comparable status.

