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alaska report

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Alaska's Polar Bear Seas: *Victims of a Desperate Administration?*

Harmful drilling planned in the Chukchi Sea

America's Arctic seas, off the north coast of Alaska, are the focal point for a conflict between the Federal government's aim to promote offshore oil drilling and the plight of wildlife struggling to survive as global warming shrinks its habitat. So crucial is this battle that concerned Americans now call Alaska's two segments of the Arctic Ocean as the "Polar Bear Seas".

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The Chukchi Sea (west of the Beaufort Sea) is one of Alaska's Polar Bear Seas and is home to roughly one-tenth of the world's polar bears, as well as walruses and endangered whales. Native villagers along Alaska's North Slope rely on the sea for cultural and nutritional subsistence.

In February the U.S. Department of Interior's Minerals Management Service moved forward with an oil and gas lease sale for drilling in the Chukchi Sea. The Chukchi sale, Lease Sale 193, has been mired in controversy, as members of Congress called for a halt, and a broad coalition of conservation groups including Sierra Club and Alaska Natives challenged the sale in court. The suit was based on the agency's failure to adequately assess the impacts of drilling in this fragile marine habitat. Impacts include seismic testing, tanker traffic, the use of ice-breaking vessels, and the ever present threat of an oil spill—for which no clean up ability has been demonstrated.

Polar Bear Sea controversy escalated in early January, when the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service failed to decide whether or not to list the polar bear as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. (See Polar Bears, next page.) The agency said it was postponing its decision for roughly one month—enough time to allow the lease sale to move forward first.

On the day of the lease sale activists with Sierra Club, Alaska Wilderness League, Pacific Environment, and Alaska Natives braved 13 below zero degree F. temperatures in Anchorage to express their opposition to the sale. Additional protests took place at Shell Oil gas stations in five states in conjunction with the Anchorage demonstration.

But the lease sale moved forward and resulted in record bids from Shell, Conoco Phillips, and three other companies, totaling more than $2.6 billion. According to the U.S. Department of Interior, this represents the largest Outer Continental Shelf lease sale in the history of Alaska, with bids exceeding $100 million for rights to drill a single 3-mile by 3-mile stretch of the sea.

The sale broke records not just for bidding prices. It broke records for the price in wildlife and wild places that the Bush administration is willing to pay in its desperate quest for oil and corporate profits.

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Chuckchi Sea Leasing

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The Interior Department is in such a rush to open the fragile waters of the Arctic's Polar Bear Seas to drilling that it has failed to consider the consequences of a major oil spill. Currently there is no way to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic's broken sea ice.

Oil and gas development offshore will also add stress to a rapidly changing environment hammered by global warming and record summer ice loss. It is irresponsible to move ahead with the lease sale in light of global warming and its undeniable major effect on the Arctic. Scientists say America's polar bears could disappear before the end of the century (see adjacent article.)

There is currrently no proven method for cleaning or controlling an oil spill in icy Arctic waters.

To protect the Polar Bear seas, the administration should be doing everything it can to fight global warming by investing in conservation and clean energy solutions. Instead, it is hastening the demise of polar bears by promoting drilling in our most sensitive special places.

Senator John Kerry has introduced legislation to prohibit any oil and gas exploration activities in the "Polar Bear Seas" until the polar bear is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and critical habitat is designated. Sierra Club is strongly supporting this legislation to stop drilling in threatened. polar bear habitat ◆

-- Trish Rolfe

Polar Bears in Peril

Listing needed under Endangered Species Act

America's Arctic is on the front lines of global warming—with its rate of warming about twice that of the rest of the world. Polar bears in particular are in increasing danger, due to the large-scale and alarming melting of the sea ice that makes up their habitat.

Studies have documented plunging survival rates for cubs, falling body weights for adults, strandings on land for bears that are used to hunting for prey on vast expanses of ice, and even drowning cases. A recent U.S. Geological Survey report indicates that both of America's polar bear populations could disappear by 2050.

In fact, global warming poses such a threat to the polar bear's survival that the bear is now being considered for listing as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. If listed it will be the first Endangered Species Act initiative taken by the U.S. government on behalf of an animal because of global warming.

However the Bush Administration has other ideas. In January, the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service missed a court-ordered deadline to decide whether or not to list the polar bear as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, taking a 30 day delay.

It has been three years since the petition to list the polar bear was first submitted. At each step in the listing process, Fish and Wildlife Service has either missed its deadline or waited until the last possible day to make its decision.

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☞ WHAT YOU CAN DO TO STOP CHUKCHI LEASING AND HELP POLAR BEARS:

Contact members of Congress at their local offices, by phone via Capitol switchboard (202)224-3121, or by fax. Urge them to support the Markey bill (HR 5058) or Kerry Bill (S 2568) to stop Lease Sale 193 in the Chukchi Sea.

Talking points for your phone call, letter or email:

** We must put polar bear protection ahead of new oil development on our Polar Bear seas -- at least until the Secretary of the Interior determines whether to list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

** The planned oil and gas leasing and development in the Polar Bear Seas will irrevocably damage this fragile habitat and put the bears' survival in grave doubt. Spills are already an every day occurence in oil drilling. The oil industry reported 4,534 spills across Alaska's North Slope between 1996 and 2004 alone. There is currrently no proven method for cleaning or controlling an oil spill in icy Arctic waters, where stormy weather is common.

More Talking Points:

** The scientific evidence of threats to the polar bear is overwhelming and a vast majority of scientists and the American public agree that the polar bear needs to be protected. That protection should start with prohibiting offshore drilling and the seismic testing, boat traffic, and oil spills that accompany it, and then list these animals under the Endangered Species Act.

** The Arctic's Polar Bear Seas –the Beaufort and Chukchi --provide critical habitat for polar bears and other important marine mammals such as beluga and bowhead whales and bearded and spotted seals. The Chukchi Sea alone supports approximately one-tenth of the world's remaining polar bear population. The push to drill the Polar Bear Seas threatens to destroy the area forever. Climate change is already having dramatic impacts on the sea ice and marine and coastal habitats of Arctic wildlife. The Arctic ice cover has been shrinking at a rate of 3 percent per decade, and a recent USGS report says that America's polar bear populations could disappear by 2050.

Polar bear survival in doubt

Global warming melts sea ice habitat

Now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has missed its final deadline for deciding whether or not to protect the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act. In the absence of a reasonable explanation for the delay, we are asking for a federal investigation into the hold up.

The Sierra Club, Alaska Wilderness League, and four other environmental organizations wrote to Interior Department Inspector General Earl E. Devaney and Program Integrity Director Alan Boehm, asking them to look into the reasons for Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall's failure to meet the listing deadline. The listing delay allowed just enough time for oil companies to bid on rights to drill in prime polar bear habitat in Alaska's Chukchi Sea on February 6. (See adjacent article.)

Senator John Kerry's new legislation would prohibit oil and gas exploration activities in the "Polar Bear Seas" – until the polar bear is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, critical habitat is designated, and until the full impacts of exploration on polar bear populations are fully understood. Please contact your members of Congress now to support this bill, as outlined in the action box on p. 2. ◆

-- Trish Rolfe

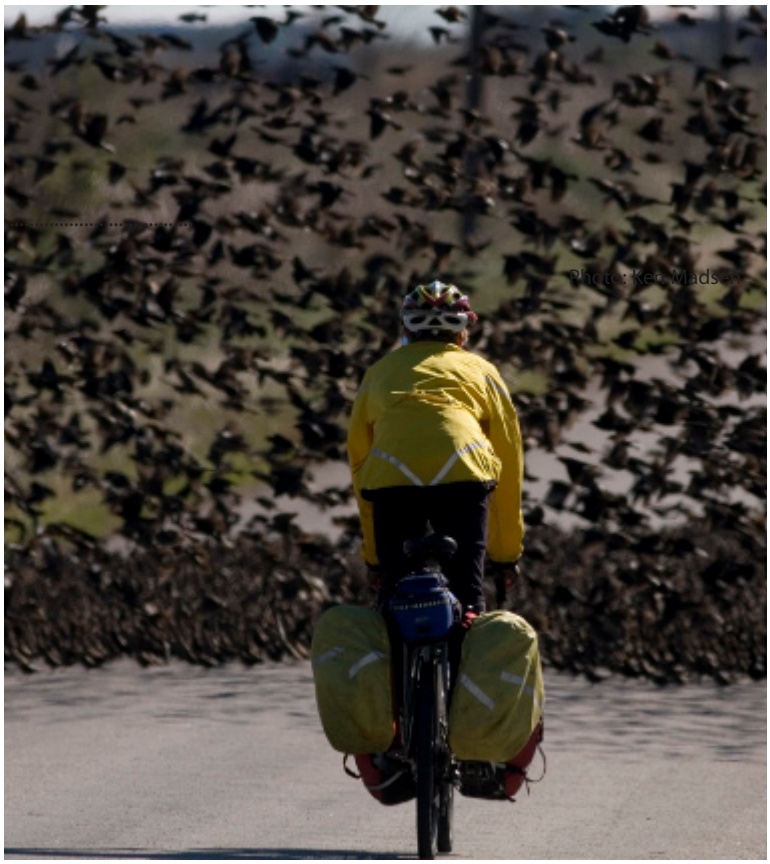

photo: Ken Madsen

Bikers join with birds for preservation of the Arctic Refuge

Update: Bird Year for the Arctic Refuge

Valentines Day, Tampa Bay, Florida.

Since we left our home in the far north Yukon in June of 2007 and embarked on our "Bird Year," we have traveled 8800 fossil-fuel-free miles (mostly by bicycle!) Malkolm, now 15, has identified 446 bird species and hopes to up that total past 500 before we finish. When we fled New Mexico in December and cycled south and east, we thought winter was behind us, but Louisiana, Mississippi and the Florida Panhandle surprised us. We thought we were tough until we cycled into bitter headwinds, cold rain and temperatures in the 20s and 30s.

"Look at that," Wendy said one day, "I wondered why my toes were so sore. I have chilblains!"

Chilblains, red and inflamed extremities, are caused by prolonged cool, wet and windy conditions. The last time we encountered them was on a five-week Arctic trip. We know that we are connected to the Arctic Refuge in many ways – but we didn't think that a cold injury was one of the connections!

Despite the sore toes, we've discovered many positive connections to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as we've cycled across the continent in search of birds that migrate to the Arctic coastal plan in the summer. We've seen Pacific loons, sandhill cranes, yellow warblers, whimbrels, snow geese and many other species of birds that fly each year from the Lower 48 up to the Arctic. At each of our presentations, we've talked about the need to protect the Arctic Refuge; we've met many people who care about the future of the Arctic--even though they may never visit there in person. We hope that a wave of support for preservation of this remote, wildlife rich area will continue to build that will lead to permanent protection of the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge.

Malkolm does regular updates on CBC North - morning interviews with the radio station in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. We aim to raise at least $12,000 for habitat protection in the Arctic and elsewhere (one dollar for every mile we travel). By bicycling, we hope that we are raising awareness about human fossil-fuel use and how it affects the wildlife we love.

Now we are heading towards the Everglades. During March and April we will cycle across northern Florida and the Gulf states, timing our travel to coincide with the songbird migration across the Gulf of Mexico. In April we'll join an International Migratory Bird Day event on Dauphin Island, Alabama. We'll finish our Bird Year by cycling through Texas, ending up in Big Bend National Park on June 21st.

To find out more about our adventures, please visit our website: www.birdyear.com. ◆

-- Ken Madsen <birdyearken@yahoo.com>

Déjà vu: another Tongass plan targets roadless areas, old-growth

The majestic old growth forests and sweeping roadless areas of the Tongass National Forest are again at risk. In late January, the Bush administration released a new plan to reverse roadless area protections for the Tongass, as it had shortly before for national forests in Idaho and Colorado. The Bush plan opens new areas to logging and puts a "for sale" sign on vast swaths of the nation's largest national forest - the Tongass rainforest in Alaska.

The Bush administration's new management plan for the Tongass National Forest in Alaska puts millions of pristine acres in this ancient rainforest on the auction block to the timber industry. Yet it will raise no revenue for the U.S. government, as the U.S. taxpayers themselves will have to pay to build the roads the timber companies need to access untouched trees in scarce roadless areas.

"The Tongass is the crown jewel of our nation's roadless wildlands," said Trish Rolfe at Alaska Sierra Club. "Wild salmon, bears, eagles, and wolves thrive there among moss-draped ancient trees, along crystalline fjords and untamed rivers. It has nine million acres of roadless areas that lack permanent protection. The Bush administration has just put some of the best of them on the chopping block."

Having failed so far to do away with the popular Clinton-Area "Roadless Rule" (the Roadless Areas Conservation Rule) nationwide, Bush appointees now are aiming at individual states. In Colorado and Idaho, as in Alaska, the Bush administration plans to roll back the Roadless Rule and open protected areas to development. The Roadless Rule has kept new road construction and most logging out of unroaded backcountry areas in the national forests. (See **alaska report**, Mar 04, Sep 03, Feb 03, May 01, Feb 01, Aug 00, May 00, Nov 99; Aug 99, Mar 98.)

The land management plan released in January was ordered more than two years ago by a federal court which concluded that the old plan justifying opening Tongass wildlands for development was invalid due to several flaws, including a gross overestimation of demand for Tongass logs. (**alaska report**, Nov 05, Apr 99.)

Tongass logging fell dramatically in the 1990s, and for years now has been conducted at reduced levels that don't require slicing roads and clear cuts into virgin old-growth forests. President Clinton established roadless-area protection in 2000, but in 2003, the Bush administration began to exempt the Tongass from the Roadless Rule. However, they were thwarted in proceeding with new timber sales in roadless areas due to critical defects in the Tongass forest plan. This year's new TLUMP (Tongass Land Use Management plan) was supposed to correct those defects, but still reopens important pristine areas to logging and road construction.

"With so much of our forest heritage already lost, every roadless acre counts," said Larry Edwards with Greenpeace in Sitka, Alaska. "The spectacular forested roadless areas in Alaska deserve as much protection as forests in every other state."

Congress has also spoken up against building roads in remote Tongass wildlands at taxpayer expense. The House of Representatives has voted three times to stop taxpayer dollars from funding new Tongass logging roads although the Senate has not followed suit. (**alaska report**, Aug 07, Sep 03.) Legislators saw the economic reality: there is little demand for Tongass timber.

More than half of the lands within the national forest system – public lands owned by all Americans -- have already been subjected to development and road building at great expense to the taxpayer. And, the Forest Service cannot even maintain the 400,000 miles of roads that already crisscross the national forest system. It has accumulated a $6 billion maintenance backlog for its crumbling current road system. As global warming threatens to change dramatically the landscapes of our wild places, national forest roadless areas offer the best safe harbors for America's wildlife. But, intent on opening protected areas in America's national forests to the logging industry before it leaves office, the Bush Administration seems to be saying, "Rev up the chainsaws."

Adding Insult to Injury

Mark Rocick

Mark Rorick, chair of the Juneau Group of the Sierra Club, in an opinion piece sent to the Juneau *Empire* on Feb 25, states "The Forest Service's TLUMP is not designed to meet current market demand but is instead a plan to create an expanded timber industry. The Forest Service's plan to phase in increasingly higher cutting volumes, step by step, is obviously designed … to achieve their goal of an expanded timber industry.... To achieve the cutting goals the Forest Service's plan is to use every method available to them regardless of what the costs are. This effort was started before the TLUMP decision and it involves methods, such as full-on clear cutting, that are both an injury to forest habitats and an insult to our nation's taxpaying citizens."

Rorick's op-ed points out that one method the Forest

Oppose Juneau Road Boondoggle--*decision near*

The Juneau Group of the Sierra Club asks Sierra Club members to save Berners Bay and Lynn Canal from the Juneau Road-Ferry Project. A road would forever alter the wildness and beauty of this area. The road is one federal permit away from beginning construction – and this may be issued soon! Please tke action!

The Juneau Road-Ferry Project would replace the existing ferry service in Lynn Canal between Juneau, Skagway and Haines. There would be 50 miles of new highway from Echo Cove (40 miles north of Juneau) around Berners Bay, up the east side of Lynn Canal to the Katzehin River (90 miles north of Juneau). Berners Bay and Lynn Canal are wild, undeveloped places that rank among major assets of the Alaskan landscape. The road would carve a highway along the largest Roadless Area left in our country's national forest system and scar the 6,000'+ Lynn Canal, one of the deepest and longest fjords in the world.

Arguments against the Juneau Road:

· **It is unnecessary:** Local communities have opposed it; Juneau, Haines and Skagway are already served by the Alaska Marine Highway System. The best access to the State Capital will remain a 2 hour flight from Anchorage. ·

· **The cost is grossly underestimated:** From 2005 to 2007, the cost jumped from $258 million to $374 million. What will the final cost be in 2020 when the Project, including numerous bridges, elevated structures, retaining walls, tunnels, avalanche snowsheds, the new ferry terminal and new shuttle ferries, and a parking lot, is scheduled for completion?

· **Juneau Road Money should go to needed projects** like **t**he Mat-Su Borough's critical road projects in need of $1.2 billion and the Mat-Su's and Anchorage's Glenn – Seward Highway-to-Highway Connection.

For more talking points, see **alaska report**, Dec 07, Mar 05, Jul 04, Mar 04, Nov 00, Feb 00, Aug 99, Mar 98., Dec 97.

What you can do:

Alaskans: Tell your state representatives and fellow Alaskans that the Juneau Road-Ferry Project is unnecessary, fiscally irresponsible, and that the money should go to urgent transportation projects. Tell them that Alaskans value irreplaceable wild places like Berners Bay and Lynn Canal.

*Alaskans **and** Lower 48 readers:* write Letters to the Editor of the following Alaska papers. If you have visited Alaska, tell them that you value coming to one place in our country that is not dominated by roads and automobile traffic, that the unique "Marine Highway" system of ferries is a special treasure that deserves support, not undercutting by roads.

Letter to the Editor

Anchorage Daily News: letters@adn.com [225-word limit]

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner: http://www.newsminer.com/submit/letter_editor/ [350-word limit]

Juneau Empire: letterstotheeditor@juneauempire.com [400-word limit]

Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman: contact@frontiersman.com [400-word limit].

Contact Governor Sarah Palin and Alaska State House and Senate Representatives

PO Box 110001 State Capitol, Room __
(for their room #, see http://w3.legis.state.ak.us/)
Juneau, AK 99801 Juneau, AK 99801-1182
http://gov.state.ak.us/govmail.php
Representative_First Name_Last Name@legis.state.ak.us
Senator_ First Name_Last Name@legis.state.ak.us

For more information contact:
Kevin Hood ,Juneau Group of the Sierra Club,
kevinhood6@hotmail.com or (907)789-7853 ◆

Tongass plan

-- from previous page

Service will use in their new Plan to "ramp up the Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ)" for timber-cutting is to allow raw log exporting. This means that "many of the timber sale jobs will also be exported. There is no doubt that the Forest Service will be allowing raw log exporting on future sales. For instance, the EIS for the Navy timber sale [on Etolin Island about 15 miles south of the city Wrangell] says straight out that the sale will also be a raw log export sale."

The Forest Service also counts on continued taxpayer subsidies for road building: "It is well known," Rorick continues, "that logging in the Tongass is not economically viable without road building subsidies. Spending a million or more dollars to build the roads for one medium-sized timber sale is the norm on the Tongass. The Forest Service's own analysis of scheduled sales has almost every medium-to-large sale dependent on taxpayers' paying for the road building.

Even so, the Forest Service goes ahead with these sales. For example, the estimated roading cost for the Navy sale is $4,923,846. Future Tongass sales depending on taxpayer road building subsidies include Emerald Bay, Gravina, Three Mile, Woodpecker, Stanley, Madan, Cholmondeley, and the list goes on and on. This is the insult. American citizens are paying for the Tongass National Forest to be clear cut when even half of the money they are paying to keep the clear cuts going could easily provide more [local] 'in the forest' jobs then the timber industry now provides." There are many jobs in the "more then 300,000 acres of Tongass forest lands in need of wildlife thinning and restoration." ◆

Yukon Flats Land Swap threatens Wildlife Refuge

A proposed land exchange between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Doyon Native Regional Corporation would potentially trigger large-scale oil and gas development in Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, one of the nation's largest and most productive. **Draft Environmental Impact Statement Comments are due March 10**.

Doyon, would trade 150,000 acres of its holdings in the Refuge for 110,000 acres of upland refuge lands, plus rights to oil and gas only in 97,000 contiguous acres. This would create a swath of privately held land extending from the north-central boundary of the Refuge to its south-central boundary, thus dividing the Refuge in half.

In exchange the refuge would acquire 150,000 acres of valuable waterfowl and other wildlife habitat in lowlands near the Yukon River and two major tributaries.

If Doyon produces oil and/or gas on its new acquisition, phase two of the exchange would give the Refuge a 1.25% share of Doyon's revenues. Doyon would reallocate 56,000 selection acres outside the Refuge and sell "up to" 120,000 acres more to the Refuge. Each party would exchange another 132,000 acres to consolidate land ownership. An additional small amount of Doyon land would be transferred to the Refuge if a pipeline and road corridor crosses Refuge land.

Wild river, proposed wilderness and subsistence at risk

The lands Doyon would receive include 26,376 acres within a 658,000-acre upland area now recommended for wilderness designation by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Extending to the border of the adjacent BLM-administered White Mountains National Recreation Area, the 26, 376 acres would divide the recommended wilderness into two separate tracts. In the event oil and/or gas is produced, a pipeline and permanent road corridor to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline would cross recommended Refuge wilderness area or BLM *de facto* wilderness.

Beaver Creek Wild River has a 16-mile stretch inside the Refuge. As with other designated wild rivers, Beaver Creek is closed to oil and gas leasing and the mining laws. Doyon's 110,000-acre block would bracket the river's Wild & Scenic corridor. Oil and gas production near the corridor would be in the river's view shed, and pollution from oil spills could reach the river itself. Oil/gas production in the eastern Doyon block would involve a pipeline/road corridor crossing of the river.

Many although not all Native villagers oppose the proposed exchange as a threat to their subsistence economies. They do not want their village lands opened or adjacent subsistence-rich Doyon lands committed to Doyon exploration and potential development. As most village corporation shareholders are also shareholders of Doyon, the villagers will have a significant role in deciding whether the exchange will go forward.

A gigantic giveaway of public resources?

Within the Refuge, Doyon and the five Native village corporations own about 2.5 million acres, of which about a million acres have oil and gas potential, according to the DEIS..

Doyon seeks the land exchange because of previous seismic data indicating that the core land block covers the deepest part of the oil-rich subsurface Yukon Flats basin, and has very high oil and gas potential. However, based on a 2006 assessment by USGS and Petrotechnical Resources Alaska Doyon now believes the quantity of oil may be much higher—800 million barrels or more.

This latest information was not available during the lengthy negotiations leading up to the proposed exchange. As the DEIS notes, "This information likely would have influenced which lands Doyon was willing to give up in the exchange," specifically 7 of the 16 Doyon townships the Refuge could acquire.

Production of oil and/or gas on the core block and other adjacent Doyon land could lead to drainage of oil and/or gas resources under adjacent Refuge lands. This in turn would probably lead the federal government to lease adjacent lands in order to prevent such drainage, thus expanding the scope of oil and gas exploration and potential development far beyond that envisioned in the proposed exchange. With the State getting 90 percent of federal revenues from such leasing, Uncle Sam could be engaging in a land exchange that will leave the American public holding the bag.

A major defect of the DEIS is that appraisal amounts for the exchange are unavailable; thus a real economic evaluation of the exchange cannot be made

Congress will have a say: If the Fish and Wildlife Service decides to undertake the exchange, a congressional review of the trade would follow because a land exchange involving designated wilderness requires congressional approval. Given the potential damage to Refuge resources and the economic uncertainty, Congressional should give this proposed deal a thorough investigation. ◆

-- Jack Hession

What you can do: Send your comment **BY MARCH 10**. *Recommend adoption of the No Action alternative,* which calls for no land exchange. This alternative would reaffirm the Fish and Wildlife Service's existing policy of not allowing oil and gas exploration and development on Refuge lands because such activities are incompatible with the purposes and values for which the Refuge was established.

No Action also leaves intact the recommended wilderness, thus protecting Congress's options when it eventually considers the Service's and other wilderness proposals. And No Action avoids exploration and potential oil and gas extraction perilously close to Beaver Creek Wild River.

Send written comments to:
Yukon Flats EIS Project Office, c/o ENSR
835 Bragaw Street, Suite 490
Anchorage, AK 99508

The DEIS does not provide an e-mail address for public comments., but you can email comments to yukonflats@fws.gov with a request that the Refuge register your comments and forward them to ENSR (the consulting firm that prepared the DEIS.).

Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor
Alaska Report
Sierra Club,
San Francisco, California

Dear Editor,

As a longtime member of the Alaska Chapter, I am pleased to see our state begin to expand rail service; this will lower pollution, congestion, and tackle global warming. I would like the Sierra Club to adopt a national rail investment initiative, both passenger and freight, as part of its Cool Cities Program. I propose that we name our initiative in honor and memory of Gordon B. Wright, who died suddenly a year ago--in February 2007.

Gordon, a composer and symphony orchestra conductor by profession, was a tireless advocate for Alaska wilderness and for the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. He founded the Club's Denali Group (Fairbanks) in 1970 and helped start the Northern Alaska Environmental Center. Gordon was a strong believer in the environmental benefits of rail. He was a member of the National Association of Railroad Passengers since 1976.

Back in the 1970s, while both Gordon and I were working for passage of ANILCA and were concerned about oil spills from the new trans-Alaska pipeline, we often talked about the energy efficiency of trains compared with trucks and planes, and how railroads use less land and have less public access impact than highways.

This is equally true today, and, given the concern about global warming, even more important. According to the National Association of Railroad Passengers,

** Amtrak in 2003 consumed 18% less energy per passenger-mile than commercial aviation; 17% less than automobiles,

** Commuter rail was 22% more energy efficient than automobiles, and freight rail was 18% more fuel efficient per ton-mile than water carriers. And, comparing energy consumption per rail-car-mile and per mile traveled by heavy single-unit and combination trucks, the rail-car consumed 36% fewer British Thermal Units.

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This nation has poured subsidies into airports and highways, but we have starved our rail system.

The National Association of Railroad Passengers goes on to say, in its November 3 2006 article "Rail Needed to Help on Global Warming," (www.narprail.org) "Obviously, rail's contribution could be even stronger if the U.S. had a serious rail passenger investment program, and stronger policy support for freight rail. Moreover, the passenger figures understate rail's real contribution because they do not reflect rail's ability to encourage pedestrian-friendly real estate development and intercity rail's encouragement of transit-friendly development".

The national Sierra Club's emphasis on hybrid cars in its Cool Cities program is laudable, and important. However, hybrid cars do not eliminate, nor even reduce, the need for more roads. The Sierra Club needs to promote national investment in rail to encourage pedestrian friendly real estate development, transit friendly development, and to reduce the need for more big, heavy trucks on our existing highways and bridges.

For example, in Anchorage, there is pressure to extend Bragaw Street from Tudor Road through the University wetlands to Northern Lights Boulevard. More hybrid cars and trucks won't change this pressure. If this road is built, it will ruin my favorite ski area, as well as important habitat for moose, birds, and small mammals. More frequent buses or commuter rail would reduce the push for this road extension by eliminating some peoples' need to drive.

This nation has poured subsidies into airports and highways, but we have starved our rail system. Gordon felt our long distance trains--like our new Alaska national parks and wildlife refuges which he helped to create -- were national treasures. He celebrated his 70th birthday by taking Amtrak's Sunset Limited from Florida to Los Angeles. One month before his death, he took the Empire Builder from Seattle east. He wanted to make these trips "before Amtrak went out of the long haul business". We in the Sierra Club can honor Gordon's memory by proving him wrong about Amtrak's fate. I think the Sierra Club can use its good national reputation to promote a greatly expanded network of long distance trains, especially during this era of increasing alarm about global warming. ◆

Cynthia Wentworth
Alaska Chapter <cwentworth@gmail.com>

Jewelers Urge Bristol Bay protection

Just before Valentine's Day, five of the nation's leading jewelry retailers -- Tiffany & Co., Ben Bridge Jeweler, Helzberg Diamonds, Fortunoff, and Leber Jeweler, Inc. – announced their support to permanently protect Alaska's Bristol Bay watershed from large-scale metal mining, including the massive proposed Pebble gold mine (See **alaska report**, May 07, Jun 06, Dec. 05, Oct 05). These retailers, who had $2.2 billion in sales in 2006, took this step at the invitation of Alaskans, who seek to protect wild salmon, clean water, and traditional Alaskan ways of life from the damaging effects of industrial metal mines.

The retailers are among a group of 28 jewelry retailers, representing 23 percent of US jewelry sales, who have endorsed the No Dirty Gold campaign's "Golden Rules" -- human rights and environmental criteria for mining. The retail jewelers who have endorsed the "No Dirty Gold" campaign want to be able to tell their customers that the precious metals they sell are mined responsibly -- that the materials used in their jewelry have been mined in environmentally friendly ways, respectful of the Bristol Bay salmon fishery and communities that depend on it.

The proposed Pebble mine is backed by UK-based Anglo American, one of the world's largest metal mining companies, and the Canadian firm Northern Dynasty Minerals. The Bristol Bay watershed, where the proposed mine would be located, supports the world's most productive wild salmon fishery -- critical to the state's economy and to the livelihood of many Alaska Native communities. The massive open-pit mine would threaten Katmai National Park and Lake Clark National Park.

Last year Nunamta Aulukestai (Caretakers of the Land) an association of eight Alaska Native corporations and a diverse group of Alaska Native communities, commercial fishermen, businesses, and sportsmen, publicly invited jewelry retailers to support protection of Alaska's Bristol Bay watershed from large-scale mining. The invitation ran as a full-page ad in National Jeweler magazine.

New Report Highlights Concern Over Mining Impacts

The controversial Pebble mine is featured in a new report released in February by the No Dirty Gold consumer campaign led by EARTHWORKS and Oxfam America. The report, "Golden Rules: Making the Case for Responsible Mining," documents the toll of irresponsible mining on people, water, and wildlife at a time when soaring metals prices are driving new mining development globally. (For a copy of the report, visit www.nodirtygold.org)

Some 100,000 consumers in more than 100 countries have signed the "No Dirty Gold" pledge, urging mining companies to provide alternatives to "dirty" gold. The No Dirty Gold campaign urges mining companies to implement best practices that can be independently verified -- at existing and new operations. According to the campaign's new report, mining in Ghana, Indonesia, Nevada, and other parts of the world continues to pollute air and water, damage farmland and forests, and even fuel violent confllict. ◆

– from Renewable Resources Coalition

alaska report

alaska report is the newsletter of the Sierra Club Alaska Task Force, encouraging advocacy on Alaska federal lands issues, particularly as they pertain to the passage and implementation of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

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