

# Sierra Borealis *alaska report*

SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER  
SEPTEMBER 2022



Chapter election coming up, p 3

## Arctic National Wildlife Refuge takes center stage

### A summer trip to the Arctic Refuge

Earlier this summer, members of Sierra Club's Alaska team spent a week in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge getting a first-hand look at one of the world's last true wildernesses and grounding ourselves in the reality of why it is so important to fight to protect the Arctic.

Our group of eight were three Sierra club staff, the head of Native Outdoors, the executive director of the Continental Divide trail coalition, a volunteer from AfroOutdoors, a member of Latino Outdoors, and an Arctic Wild Guide.

We started in the Gwich'in community of Arctic Village—just outside the refuge boundary—where members of the community talked with us about their subsistence culture and the changes they have seen in recent years due to our warming climate.

Taking off from Arctic village in three small planes (needed to fly all of us and our gear), we landed in the Brooks Range for a few days at a base camp in the -- continued page 2

### Running for the Arctic Refuge

"Run for the Refuge" is an annual summer event to help raise awareness of the need to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. For 26 years, it has been organized by the Northern Alaska Environmental Center in Fairbanks.

This summer I coordinated the event for the Center on July 17. As Race Director, I didn't get to participate in the actual run, but my heart raced to see more than a hundred people (in person!) turn up to choose a five kilometer or ten kilometer run at the north campus UAF Trails. We also offered and promoted a virtual "Run Anywhere" option, and at distant locations elsewhere in the country, another 200 people ran, walked, hiked, biked, paddled, and even surfed to show their solidarity with keeping the Arctic coastal plain wild and free from fossil fuel development.

The overall atmosphere was festive, with families, UAF

runners, local legislators, and long-time activists greeting each other and enjoying the cool summer day. The Northern Center provided participants with information about the Arctic Refuge, the adjacent Western Arctic that is also being threatened by oil & gas development, and the Save Our Domes campaign to oppose

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Camping on the windy coastal Beaufort Sea barrier island where our group of eight ended our Arctic journey

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photo: Andrea Feniger

Moss campion

## Summer trip to the Arctic Refuge -- from page 1

valley of the Aichilik River, then rafted north on the Aichilik, finally spending three days camped on the coastal plain. The Gwich'in refer to this as The Sacred Place Where Life Begins because of all the Porcupine herd of caribou that come to this herb-rich area between the mountains and the Arctic Ocean to calve here every summer.

Along the way we saw lots of fossilized coral and charming wildflowers, including this moss campion. If it is as big as your hand, a clump of moss campion is about 20 years old, meaning lots of the moss campion we saw are hundreds of years old.

We got very lucky with weather! It rained only once briefly and otherwise was beautiful and sunny. The coldest day was the one on the coast. The mosquitos came out for a few days, but luckily we had plenty of bug nets and repellent.

Our journey ended at the Arctic Ocean, where we set up our final camp on one of the barrier islands just off the shore and explored some of the remaining shore ice at the edge of the Beaufort Sea.

It was a week full of powerful reminders of what is at stake if oil development and drilling take place on these sacred lands. We will continue to do all we can to ensure that it never happens. Our corporate campaign is working—every major U.S. Bank has agreed not to fund drilling and three international insurance companies have pledged to no longer insure drilling in the Refuge. We've held them off for 35 years—since the first Reagan-era plan to open the coastal plain to drilling in 1987—and we will continue to hold them off until we can achieve permanent protection. ❖

-- Andrea Feniger



Beaufort Sea shore ice

photo: Andrea Feniger

## Run for the Refuge 2022

-- from page 1

open pit mining here in Fairbanks.

The Arctic Refuge comprises 19.3 million acres in northeast Alaska, land that has been stewarded and held sacred by Gwich'in and Iñupiat people for millennia. The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge is known as *lizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit*, or "the sacred place where life begins" in Gwich'in. This sacred place provides calving grounds for the Porcupine caribou herd, which in turn provides for the food sovereignty and traditional cultural practice of Indigenous people, who have led the efforts to protect the lands, waters, wildlife, and people from harmful industrial extraction. The Run for the Refuge celebrates the place and its history of care and protection.

As Emily Sullivan, Arctic Program director, notes:

"The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act officially opened the coast plain to potential oil extraction by a "backdoor" maneuver, but a flopped lease sale in January 2021 saw only three bidders, with a majority of bids by the Alaska

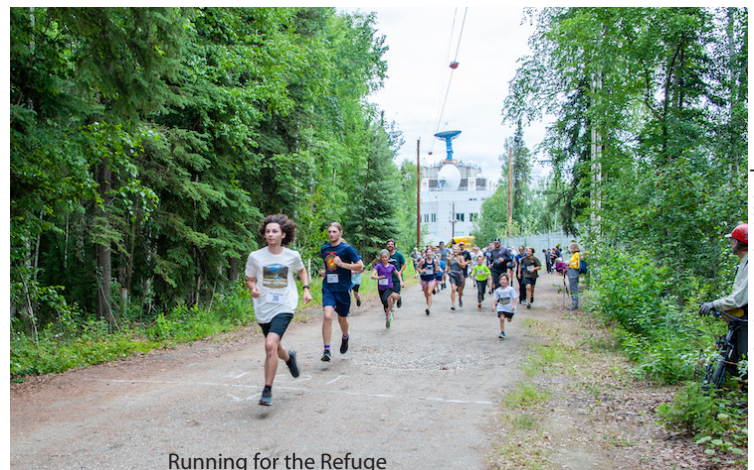


photo: Frank Williams

Running for the Refuge

Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA). Upon entering office, The Biden Administration put a temporary halt on leasing, and all oil companies with inholdings have since backed out of their leases. [The latest was Knik Arm Services.] However, AIDEA still holds seven leases and has filed a lawsuit against the Biden administration's decision to pause leases. The Northern Center has filed for intervention in this case alongside the Gwich'in Steering Committee, in support of the Administration. To prevent future lease sales, seismic testing, and extraction on the coastal plain, permanent legislative protections for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge remain a national priority."

Thank you to everyone who ran with us, or who holds the wild Arctic in their hearts. Save the date of July 15, 2023 for next year's Run, as we continue to advocate for permanent protections for the Arctic Refuge. ❖

-- Christin Swearingen



## YOU and Alaska Chapter election: invitation to volunteer to lead

It's nearly time for the 2022 Sierra Club Alaska Chapter election to be held for three 2023 volunteer positions on the Chapter Executive Committee. Simply voting in the election lets you, a Sierra Club member in Alaska, help decide policy indirectly, but why not go a step further and run for office yourself? Or nominate someone else?

Volunteer Executive Committee members elected by the Club's members in Alaska set policy and conservation priorities for the Sierra Club in Alaska and decide on **how** this Chapter allocates our resources (e.g., hiring staff, joining or filing lawsuits for environmental protection.) ExCom members also plan trainings, educational sessions, outings, and social gatherings, comment to government agencies, and write articles for this newsletter.

The Sierra Club is the nation's largest, most effective grassroots conservation organization, and it is the Chapter Executive Committee members who plan and act on ways to improve our state's environment.

Executive Committee terms are two years, with terms staggered so that approximately half the committee is elected each year.

Volunteering for the Sierra Club is a rewarding experience, and we hope you consider stepping up *now* to serve for the environment. If you are a Sierra Club member and would like to run for ExCom, or would like to suggest another member



Dale DeArmond

who is willing to run, please contact Alaska Chapter director Andrea Feniger, at [andrea.feniger@sierraclub.org](mailto:andrea.feniger@sierraclub.org)

Starting last year, our Chapter election has become all-digital, with elections held **on our website from January 24 through early February**. This is a departure from our mail-in elections of the past. We hope that in addition to reducing unnecessary waste, this new feature will boost accessibility and involvement. We know this might not be the preferred method for everyone and always seek feedback from our members, so let us know how you feel about electronic elections and your preference for future elections at [alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org)--or by sending a letter to our PO Box. ❖

*This notice and schedule comply with Sierra Club bylaws. )*



photo: Frank Williams



photo: Frank Williams



Here's a participant in Oregon, Madeleine Anderson, one of the 200 "Run Anywhere" enthusiasts for promoting the Refuge, who sent us her photo.

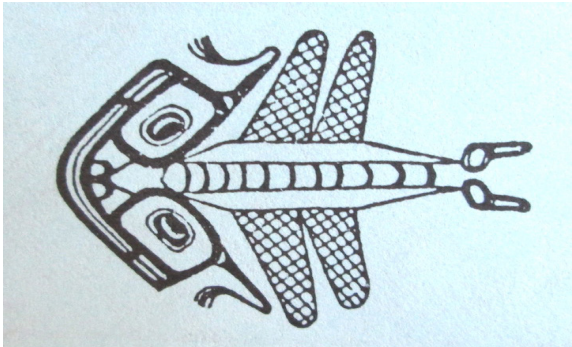
Scenes around the "Run for the Refuge"

## Sen. Lisa Murkowski's Tongass bill for new Native corporations blocked in Committee But bill is still alive

S. 3269-- (Murkowski, Sullivan), the Unrecognized Southeast Alaska Native Communities Recognition and Compensation Act, would create five urban Native corporations for Alaska Native residents of Haines, Petersburg, Wrangell, Ketchikan, and Tenakee.

Each corporation would receive 23,040 acres of Tongass National Forest surface estate, 115,200 acres (180 square miles) in total, with the Sealaska Native regional corporation owning the subsurface estate of the 115,200 acres.

An estimated 90 percent of the proposed selections are old growth stands, according to a Center for Biological Diversity analysis. S. 3269 conveys to the five corporations



Forest Service roads and related facilities needed for commercial logging operations.

On June 7, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on the bill. Christopher French, Deputy Chief of the Forest Service and the sole witness, listed the bill's adverse effects on forest management, on the Tongass land use management plan, on important public use areas, and the risk of opening ANCSA to establish the five corporations. Enactment of the bill could lead dozens of other communities found not eligible for urban corporation status to ask Congress to give them public land.

Witness French's statement did not indicate whether the Biden Administration supported or opposed the bill, but it's clear from the statement that the Forest Service would prefer to see the bill disappear-- just as earlier versions of it did during the Clinton and Obama Administrations. Sen. Murkowski finally got him to reveal that the Administration supports her bill.

Two weeks later, on June 21, when the 20-member committee prepared to vote on a package of pending bills, including S.3269, Murkowski pulled her bill off the agenda. Although her nine Republican colleagues were with her, all ten Committee Democrats opposed her bill. A tie vote would have buried her bill in committee. Democrats

may also have enjoyed some pay-back. Earlier, she and the Republican nine had killed modest wilderness bills sponsored by committee members Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and John W. Hickenlooper (D-CO).

Sen. Murkowski was angry that she was unable to advance her bill in committee, lamenting that she has spent years trying to establish the five corporations. **Chairman Joe Manchin assured Sen. Murkowski that the Committee would help her with this issue. His assurance suggests the bill will probably come back to the committee, possibly in the form of a compromise.**

### Other Murkowski public land bills

S. 1128, the University of Alaska Fiscal Foundation Act would authorize the University to select up to 360,000 acres from a pool that includes important BLM reserved lands. On May 3, the Committee reported the bill favorably (**sierra borealis** June 2022, Sept 2021).

S.1951, the Alaska Native Veteran Land Allotment Act of 2021, would allow eligible Native veterans of the Vietnam War era to select allotments up to 160 acres from a 360,000-acre pool of wildlife refuge lands. BLM has already made a pool of about 30 million BLM acres available. Under existing law Native allotments can be selected only from unreserved BLM lands or other BLM land the Bureau can make available. A hearing on the bill has not been scheduled (**sierra borealis** June 2021). ❖

-- Jack Hession

*Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico (the state where the first administrative wilderness – the Gila – was designated by the Forest Service, in 1924) wrote, “Wilderness is an anchor to windward. Knowing it is there, we can also know that we are still a rich nation, tending our resources as we should, not a people in despair searching every last nook and cranny of our land for a board of lumber, a barrel of oil, a blade of grass, or a tank of water.”*





# Can Commuter rail become a reality between Anchorage and Mat-Su?

Alaska has a newly formed local citizens' commuter rail committee that just had its first community meeting in Anchorage on Tuesday, August 23, and will meet again on Sept. 20. Members of this informal committee hope to revive the interest former Alaska Governor Bill Walker took in promoting commuter rail and then to bring rail ideas into real action. (<https://commuterrailak.com>)

The Sierra Club in Alaska began promoting commuter rail between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley twenty years ago. Commuter rail would operate on the existing Alaska Railroad track between Anchorage and Wasilla, which carries daily passenger trains in the summer and freight trains all year. It would offer an energy efficient alternative to commuting in a private vehicle on the Glenn Highway. It would also help reduce highway traffic during the morning and evening commute. (*sierra borealis* June 2017)

Railroads are an important part of addressing the climate emergency. The low friction of smooth steel wheels rolling on smooth steel rails allows rail transportation to emit only a third of the greenhouse gas emissions of highway transportation. This is true even when a diesel-electric locomotive such as that used by the Alaska Railroad, is pulling the train. If future trains could be electrified, they would need two-thirds less new electric power generation than highway transportation.

In 2018 former Governor Bill Walker formed the Commuter Rail Advisory Task Force. I was one of two public members. Mat-Su, Anchorage, Alaska Department of Transportation, and Alaska Railroad officials were also on the task force. After studying and much discussion, the task force recommended the Alaska Railroad's pilot program for 2020.

This program was for winter weekday service between Wasilla, downtown Anchorage, and the Anchorage Airport, with two trains daily in each direction between Oct. 15 and April 15. This service would have brought up to 468 people into Anchorage every weekday, with some continuing to the airport, for jobs or to catch flights. The airport complex is the largest employment center in Anchorage.

Initial capital and operating costs for this pilot program would have been about \$ 15 million, almost half of it one-time capital expenses. While Governor Walker enthusiastically supported this pilot program, the Legislature did not approve the funding, as state finances at that time were very tight. The task force was disbanded after a change in governorship.

The \$15 million requested was a tiny amount compared with the \$951 million spent on Alaska Highway construction during 2019-2020, 90 percent of it federal dollars. This federal money is acquired through a 10 percent state match. There's no matching system for rail--despite our climate emergency.

## Sierra Club forms volunteer rail Interest group

This is a primary reason that interested Sierra Club volunteers across the country, already part of the Club's Clean Transportation for All campaign, have formed a rail interest group, including myself for the Alaska Chapter—in

part to act on the concern that federal subsidies for roads far outweigh the subsidies for rail. Meeting monthly on Zoom, we have identified that addressing the climate

emergency requires a modal shift from road to rail. We want rail subsidies increased and highway subsidies reduced. This should be given top priority at the Federal Department of Transportation. The Sierra Club already has a policy supporting rail transportation:

<https://www.sierraclub.org/policy/transportation>.

The rail interest group is providing a supporting document for the Clean Transportation for All Campaign which backs up a renewed focus on mode shift from road to rail.

Since April, when the Sierra Club's national rail interest group began meeting, I have been sending the new group's evolving draft document to various Alaska Railroad staff and other interested people. I believe this is having an effect and will have a more important effect as Alaska's new local commuter rail committee proceeds.

Several volunteers in the Club's rail interest group are national rail experts. They provide information which helps justify and validate our Alaskan efforts. For example, Alaska decision makers have often countered the need for commuter rail with statements that bus transit and electric cars can move more people for less cost. But the rail interest group document stresses the following:

- 1) Rail is far more energy efficient than the highway mode
- 2) Electric power generation is needed to electrify road vehicles. Whether the power is from renewable or non-renewable sources, is important.
- 3) Rail is safer: fewer accidents (The Glenn Highway is notorious for its accidents, especially in winter).
- 4) Electric vehicles do nothing to reduce congestion.
- 5) Trains perform better than buses in snow and ice.
- 6) The subsidies bus service receives are hidden in costs of the highways they use: buses are overweight vehicles whose effect on highways is at least as much as that of large trucks.

In the continental U.S., freight rail is private, and passenger rail public (Amtrak). The rail interest group's document highlights the conflicts posed by Amtrak having to share tracks owned by freight rail companies. This leads to delays in the on-time performance of passenger trains, reducing ridership. But the state-owned Alaska Railroad ([www.alaskarailroad.com](http://www.alaskarailroad.com)) successfully operates both freight and passenger rail on the same track. This is an advantage, as interested Alaskans reinvigorate commuter rail planning. To learn more, contact Andrea Feniger, director, Alaska Chapter. ❖

Note: Joel Cladouhos of our new Alaska commuter rail committee designed the website in the first paragraph: (<https://commuterrailak.com>).



-- Cynthia Wentworth

# Inflation Reduction Act – lots of benefits--but concerns for Alaska

A deal to advance historic investments in climate, care, jobs, and justice was reached on July 27, 2022, as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the [Inflation Reduction Act of 2022](#). It lays out \$369 billion directed to over 100 programs that will bring down everyday costs for families, drive job creation, and reduce pollution in our communities.

Below is a breakdown of a number of crucial investments in the bill as well as investments that do not appear—although we sought them.

## Cross-cutting Environmental, Equity, and Labor Standards

Key provisions move us toward incorporating [cross-cutting environmental, equity and labor standards](#) into public investments and ensuring accountability.

### Electric Sector

This bill contains clean energy tax credits and other investments to deploy solar, wind, offshore wind, geothermal energy, and batteries across the country, including:

Residential solar, geothermal heat pumps, small wind, battery storage, and solar investment tax credits of 30 percent extended through 2033;

Wind production tax credit extended through 2033;

Offshore wind tax credit extended through 2033.

### Clean Energy Manufacturing and Industrial Sector

The package includes billions of dollars of production-based clean energy manufacturing tax credits, including:

Up to \$20 billion in loans to build new clean vehicle manufacturing facilities; \$10 billion investments tax credit to build clean technology manufacturing facilities; over \$9 billion for federal procurement of American-made clean technologies.

### Transportation

Investments in EVs and clean transportation benefits consumers and cuts costs, including:

\$4,000 consumer tax credit for lower/middle-income individuals to buy used EVs;

Up to \$7,500 tax credit to buy new EVs;

\$1 billion for zero-emission heavy-duty vehicles, which will help transition the dirtiest diesel vehicles to clean trucks, school buses, and transit buses.

### Building Decarbonization and Efficiency

The bill invests billions of dollars to make household electrification and clean energy upgrades significantly more affordable for consumers, including:

\$4 billion to boost Department of Housing and Urban Development programs to improve affordable housing.

### Cleaning Up Legacy Pollution and Creating Healthy, Toxic-Free Communities

This bill includes about \$60 billion in investments to support programs that will clean up pollution and create healthy, toxic-free communities, including:

Environmental and climate justice block grants, funded at \$3 billion, to invest in disadvantaged community projects;

Neighborhood Access and Equity Grants, at \$3 billion, for neighborhood equity, safety and affordable transportation;

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, with at least 60 percent of funds focused on disadvantaged communities;

Reinstates the Hazardous Substance Superfund financing rate tax on oil production and import, raising over \$11 billion, and guaranteeing Superfund cleanup funding for years to come;

Improving energy efficiency or water efficiency or climate resilience of affordable housing, funded at \$1 billion.

### Public Lands and Waters

The bill includes critical reforms that update federal oil and gas bonding standards, updating minimum bids, rents, and royalty rates, and ending non-competitive leasing. However, the Sierra Club is concerned with provisions for mandated lease sales and tying federal wind and solar development to required federal oil and gas leasing. Continuing to prop up the fossil fuel companies that are responsible for the dual crises of inflation and climate change is the last thing we should do in the name of addressing these crises.

#### Mandated Lease sales:

Reinstates an offshore oil and gas lease sale conducted in the Gulf of Mexico;

Conducts two more lease sales in the Gulf and another in Alaska's Cook Inlet;

Mandates new offshore (60 M acres) and onshore (2 M acres) leasing;

Forests: \$1.8 billion for hazardous fuels reduction projects on National Forest System land within the wildland-urban interface (WUI); there are no provisions for hazardous fuel reduction projects in the backcountry or outside the WUI;

\$50 million for mature and old-growth protection and a nationwide inventory;

Restrictions on funding any new temporary or permanent roads, or motorized trails, in wilderness areas or WSAs;

\$250 million for the Fish & Wildlife Service: \$125 million for Endangered Species Act recovery; \$125 million for National Wildlife Refuges and state wildlife management areas.

### Methane Emissions Reduction Program

Methane is responsible for nearly 30 percent of impacts of climate change. The Methane Emissions Reduction Program includes more than \$1.5 billion to support efforts to reduce methane emissions, and help communities reduce the health effects of pollution.

### National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act is our bedrock environmental law that gives communities a voice in the process during permitting and construction of federally funded infrastructure projects. The bill includes funding for NEPA standards that will ensure effective review and community engagement, including: Department of Energy: \$225 million; Department of Interior: \$150 million; Forest Service: \$100 million; Department of Transportation: \$100 million; Council on Environmental Quality: \$62 million; National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration: \$20 million; Environmental Protection Agency: \$40 million. -- continued page 7



## IRA-Benefits, concerns

— from page 6

### Agriculture, Forest Restoration, and Land Conservation

The bill includes key investments in agriculture, rural economic development, and forest restoration, including: \$20 billion-plus for climate-smart agriculture practices;

\$5 billion in grants to support fire resilient forests, forest conservation, and tree planting;

Tax credits and grants for domestic production of biofuels and for sustainable aviation fuel and other biofuels;

\$2 billion for the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), with hundreds of millions of dollars directed for underutilized renewable energy technologies;

\$2.6 billion in grants to conserve and restore coastal habitats and protect communities that depend on those habitats.

### Omissions from the Bill

The bill includes no language buying back the active leases on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or undoing the Arctic drilling language passed as part of the 2017 Tax Act.

No international fossil fuel subsidy repeals are included.

The package offers no additional funding for lead service line replacement.

No dedicated funding for a Civilian Climate Corps.

### Alaska-Specific Concerns

Chapter Director Andrea Feniger reminds us that, “While the passage of a bill that tackles so many important climate issues is exciting, the imperfect IRA has some aspects that are cause for concern for Alaskans. As noted, the bill did not offer protections for The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, as we hoped it would. This region is already experiencing the impacts of climate change faster than most of the world, and its protection is imperative to the long term health of our planet, wildlife and communities. The bill also mandates Lease Sale 258 be held in Cook Inlet, despite the last lease sale being cancelled due to lack of industry interest. Cook Inlet supports a vibrant local community and is home to lots of fish and other wildlife. To ensure that this watershed does not become subject to development and potential oil spills, please take the actions suggested -- on this page.

“One other concern stemming from the IRA is the fear of a resurgence of mining in Alaska. The bill requires that renewable energy technology use critical minerals mined in the U.S., and Alaska could be a prime location for such mining. This is one of the growing pains of transitioning to a more sustainable economy, but we must ensure that we are using the best possible practices when it comes to critical minerals. This looks like first and foremost updating our antiquated mining laws, investing in the longevity of technology and recycling as much as possible. We are preparing to combat the negative parts of the IRA to ensure a healthy, thriving Alaska, and we look forward to seeing the benefits as well.” ❖

(mostly extracted from a national Sierra Club blog post)  
<https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2022/08/memo-sierra-club-analysis-inflation-reduction-act-2022>

## Act Now for Cook Inlet's future beyond Oil & Gas

A mandate to hold Lease Sale 258 in the federal waters of Lower Cook Inlet before the end of 2022 came with passage of the Inflation Reduction Act. Although we can't stop this unpopular sale from moving forward, Inletkeeper and partners will monitor the level of industry interest to push for mitigation measures.

Earlier this summer, the Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Management (BOEM) released its proposed [Five Year Plan](#). The Biden Administration's Five Year Plan for oil & gas leasing includes 11 lease sales, one in Lower Cook Inlet (Lease Sale 267 slated for 2026) and 10 in the Gulf of Mexico. The plan is required by law, but the Administration has made it clear that **now is the time for Alaskans and Americans to speak up for our energy future.**

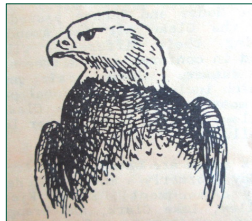
President Biden has [committed](#) to taking executive action to achieve climate goals. We're not asking him to do anything that he hasn't already committed to. This isn't a radical suggestion: we're asking Joe Biden to follow through on the commitments he made to protecting frontline communities, our health, and climate.

This year, 93,000 Americans voiced their opposition to leasing in Lower Cook Inlet. Our efforts are better spent on local solutions and building the framework for our renewable energy future. That is why [Inletkeeper's petition](#) calls on the Biden Administration to issue a presidential withdrawal, removing the Lower Cook Inlet leasing area from all present and future Five Year Plans.

BOEM's virtual meetings (**Sept 12!**) are a great opportunity to **voice support for a Five Year Plan with no new leases**. The Five Year Plan will determine whether the Biden administration intends to keep its commitment to stopping new offshore oil and gas drilling and set the country on a path towards less toxic pollution and fewer climate disasters.

We want to ensure a vibrant and regenerative future for Cook Inlet. We can't do that if our waters are sacrificed to oil and gas leasing every five years. Don't miss this moment to speak up! Call on the Biden Administration to remove Lower Cook Inlet from all current and future Five Year Plans.

-- from Cook Inletkeeper



### ⇒ WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- \***Sign the petition** at [inletkeeper.org/5YP](https://inletkeeper.org/5YP) then share it with friends & family.
- \***Submit individual comments** at [inletkeeper.org/5YPComment](https://inletkeeper.org/5YPComment).
- \***Attend the 9/12 Virtual Hearing** to submit oral testimony. [Registration](#) is strongly recommended.
- \***Write an LTE or Op-Ed**.
- \***Share the message** on social media. Use your platform to protect coastal communities! ❖

<https://inletkeeper.org/2022/08/31/act-now-for-cook-inlets-future-beyond-oil-gas/>



# Biden/Haaland Actions and Inactions put Izembek Wilderness at risk

The Biden Administration, with the apparent support of Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland, has sided with Alaskan Natives and the previous Trump Administration to approve the construction of a road through the designated wilderness of Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

The Department of Justice filed a brief with the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals opposing a legal petition from environmental groups [including Sierra Club] who say that the land swap that would allow the road construction to move forward is illegal.

The decision, if upheld, poses a serious threat to all the lands protected by the historic 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) that, among other things, created many new national parks and wildlife refuges in the state. Many of these newly protected lands, like Izembek, have an overlay of wilderness, which among other things, prohibits roads and motorized access....

Some environmentalists suggest that giving the Secretary of Interior discretion to trade public lands away could lead to the privatization of millions of acres of Alaskan conservation lands and national parks.

The Aleut people living in the village of King Cove claim they need the road for medical emergencies so that injured people can readily access an all-weather runway in nearby Cold Bay, a former military base. [Sierra Club's newsletters over many years have described how Congress has funded special improvements to local medical facilities and medical evacuation infrastructure. ]

Currently, access to Cold Bay's long runway is by boat or from a smaller airstrip in King Cove. But in stormy weather, travel by any means, including by road, is often dangerous and difficult. This situation is by no means unique to King Cove. Many Alaskan villages are far from hospitals and infrastructure that many Americans take for granted.

However, many wilderness advocates believe the real reason for the road is to carry fish captured by the commercial fishing fleet in King Cove to planes in Cold Bay for rapid shipment to markets. The [original justification for the road](#) was more pecuniary. In 1994, King Cove passed a resolution saying the road would "link together two communities having one of the State's premier fishing ports/harbors (including North America's largest salmon cannery) in King Cove with one of the State's premier airports at Cold Bay."

The Peter Pan Processing plant in King Cove is Alaska's biggest salmon and seafood processing operation. The route would make getting workers in and out of King Cove easier. ...it would also reduce costs for shipping fish. Currently, Peter Pan must load fish on a boat and transport it by sea to Cold Bay's wharf, where another truck carries it to the airstrip.

But twenty years later, the justification was changed to the medical emergency rationale.

[Izembek Refuge](#) is of international significance. Izembek is recognized as a Wetland of International Importance, and Izembek lagoons are also considered an Important Bird Area

(IBA) of global significance. The eel grass beds found in the 315,000-acre refuge provide a major "fuel" stop for migratory waterfowl. Some 98 percent of the world's black brant utilize the Izembek lagoons during the year. The refuge is also home to brown bear, wolves, caribou, and moose.

In 2013, Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell decided to preclude road construction, protecting the wildlife and wilderness values of the area. Jewell found that "Increased human traffic and noise, changed wetlands hydrology, pollution runoff, and introduced contaminants and invasive species would despoil the isthmus."



black brant photo: rewilding.org

She... concluded there were other modes of transportation available to address emergency medical transport and pledged to work to implement them.

However, the Trump Administration, under the Secretary of Interior Bernhardt, approved a land exchange....

In May of this year, former President [Jimmy Carter](#) filed an Amicus Curiae brief in support of continued wilderness designation and refuge protection. Carter, who in 1980 signed the ANILCA into law, argues that allowing a road to be constructed across the Izembek NWR Wilderness could "undercut" the purposes of the Act and set a dangerous precedent that could threaten Wilderness and conservation lands across the country. Carter characterized the Court's decision as "not only deeply mistaken; it is also dangerous."

Carter, who as president helped to negotiate the terms of ANILCA, says the Secretary of Interior has no authority to exchange lands to facilitate private development. He claims the ANILCA permits land trades only when it furthers the original conservation purposes of the Act. It's hard to believe that Secretary Haaland and the Biden Administration Justice Department don't appreciate the ...precedent this may create which could harm all of Alaska's national interest lands.

Haaland recently visited King Cove where Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association conducted an ancestral naming ceremony in which Haaland was named Agdaagum Ax^aasniikangin, or "Mother Bear."

Ironically, if this decision is allowed to stand, Secretary Haaland's legacy may be subverting the greatest conservation Act in the nation's history. ❖

(extracted from an article in "Rewilding News"

<https://rewilding.org/road-construction-approved-through-alaskas-izembek-national-wildlife-refuge/>)

[sierra borealis](#) and its predecessor "Alaska Report" have covered the attempts to get a road authorized through Izembek wilderness regularly since 1996. See [sierra borealis](#) June 2022, June 2020, June 2017, March 2013, March 2012, and earlier.)



Nature beckons!  
Get Outside

# ALASKA LOCAL OUTINGS

## Recent outing:

### 50 Years of The Clean Water Act!

We joined Environment Alaska and The Anchorage Waterways Council on Aug. 13 to celebrate 50 Years of The Clean Water Act in 2022! We started with a ribbon cutting ceremony for the new waterfowl sanctuary viewing platform and then spent the morning cleaning up trash around Chester Creek. Below are some photos that I took. -- Andrea Feninger



*Editor's note: On October 18th, 1972, President Nixon signed into law a number of amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, creating the modern Clean Water Act.*



## Upcoming outing--September 24:

We're partnering with Alaska Trails to Celebrate National Public Lands Day. Help us finish the last portion of the O'Malley Peak Trail. Hiking will be required so please wear appropriate footwear and bring water. RSVP at <https://www.alaska-trails.org/event-details/national-public-lands-day-little-omalley-peak-trail>.

## NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY: LITTLE O'MALLEY PEAK

SEP. 24TH  
9AM

Come celebrate National Public Lands Day and help finish the last portion of O'Malley Peak Trail! We'll Meet at the Glen Alps Trailhead Lower Parking Lot.



# Sierra Borealis / *alaska report*

is the newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

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## Why Environmental Volunteering is Good for Your Health and Happiness

As environmentalists fighting to improve our planet, we are attuned to the multiple crises we are facing, whether it be climate change, single-use plastics, species extinction, and more. It can be quite the uphill battle to try to save the planet, and this can cause us to feel stress, anxiety, and even despair.

However, the good news is that by getting involved and volunteering, our emotions benefit, and we can feel happier, healthier, and calmer. And there's science to prove this!

When we volunteer in our community, we can experience a physiological change called a "helper's high". This euphoric sensation happens when our brain releases endorphins, making us feel elated and excited; we experience positive health changes including less stress and a boost in happiness.

Volunteering can also help us stay healthy and live longer, improving physical health--such as lowering blood pressure. According to research, volunteers are happier and healthier than non-volunteers, and volunteering later in life can have a bigger impact on health than even exercising or eating well. Other benefits of volunteering include feeling more connected to our community, gaining confidence and personal satisfaction, feeling empowered, having a purpose, viewing the world from a broader perspective—all linked to greater joy and reduced stress.

Spending time in and around nature benefits our health and well-being. The natural world offers solace and comfort, calming when we are stressed -- lifting our mood when we feel down. Much of this is due to nature's healing attributes, vivid colors, invigorating scents, soothing sounds, fresh air, and awe-inspiring scenes.

Sierra Club provides a positive outlet to make a difference and feel better at the same time. Whether you participate in a cleanup, planting, or trail maintenance locally as a group or create your own [Team Sierra](#) initiative to support Sierra Club's work for climate, wildlife, and wild places, there are endless opportunities for volunteering through our organization...with exposure to outdoor recreation, advocacy, and leadership training.

To discover additional ideas to get involved and to learn more about why nature is so healing, check out my book [Finding Ecohappiness](#).

-- by Sandi Schwartz (newsletter editor for her Group in Sierra Club's Florida Chapter)

Author, ***Finding Ecohappiness: Fun Nature Activities to Help Your Kids Feel Happier and Calmer***

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