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DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE; EARTHJUSTICE; EYAK PRESERVATION COUNCIL;
GWICH'IN STEERING COMMITTEE; NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY;
NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION; NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE
COUNCIL; NORTHERN ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER; REPUBLICANS
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION; SIERRA CLUB; and
THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY**

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Conservationists Applaud Introduction of Senate Arctic Wilderness Legislation

*Arctic Wilderness Act Would Stop Drilling Efforts and
Permanently Protect Vital Wildlife Habitat*

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Senator Lieberman joined 25 Senate colleagues in introducing legislation that would designate the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as Wilderness. Wilderness designation would permanently protect what scientists have called the “biological heart” of our nation’s largest and wildest Refuge, placing it off limits to oil and gas development while continuing to allow vital subsistence uses.

The magnificent Arctic Refuge was first set aside for protection in 1960 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and later expanded and renamed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by Congress, and signed into law by President Carter in 1980. Since this time, pro-development forces have continually tried to open the area as part of seemingly non-stop short-sighted energy proposals. “We applaud Senator Lieberman for taking this important step toward permanent protection of this iconic landscape,” said Betsy Loyless, National Audubon Society’s Senior Vice President for Policy. “It’s time to put this long standing debate to rest.”

The Arctic Refuge is a spectacular wilderness of boreal forests, rugged mountains, sweeping tundra vistas, wild rivers, coastal lagoons, and barrier islands. The 1.5 million acre Coastal Plain, which would be protected under the legislation, provides vital habitat for an extraordinary assemblage of some of America’s most spectacular wildlife. It supports large populations of caribou, bears, wolves, musk oxen and over 135 species of migratory birds.

Furthermore, this area is sacred to the Gwich’in, Athabascan Indians who depend on the caribou for subsistence and as a link to their traditional way of life. “We are not willing to gamble with the calving and nursery grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd,” states Sarah James, Chairwoman of the Gwich’in Steering Committee. “For all too long, the oil companies have been allowed to exploit the land in an irresponsible manner.”

“The development of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would destroy the last land of our people,” said Robert Thompson, member of REDOIL, Inupiaq Eskimo, subsistence hunter, carver, grandfather, and wildlife guide from Kaktovik, Alaska. “Virtually the entire North Slope is already available for oil production. We need our land and our ocean to preserve our culture and protect our way of life. Our way of life shouldn’t compete with roads, oil rigs, and pipelines. Why do we need to upset the remaining untouched lands when people are depending on them for

their livelihoods?”

“Oil rigs on the Coastal Plain would cause irreparable damage to the fragile tundra of this unique area while doing nothing to solve our long-term energy problems,” stated Trish Rolfe, Sierra Club Alaska Representative.

Oil development in the Arctic Refuge would place wildlife, most notably the iconic polar bear, in double jeopardy. Just last month, the U.S. Geological Survey predicted that shrinking sea ice could eliminate two-thirds of the world's polar bears -- and all of Alaska's bears -- in the next 50 years. The Refuge contains the most important land denning habitat in the United States for polar bears.

“Developing the Coastal Plain will only further stress an environment already seeing the most severe impacts of climate change. As sea ice continues to melt, if oil and gas development is allowed across crucial polar bear habitat, what remains of the hungry and sensitive pregnant bears will be forced onto the land and into direct contact with the invasive and dirty infrastructure,” said Kristen Miller, Legislative Director for Alaska Wilderness League. “It is vital that we ensure that this habitat is protected as we work to reduce the effects of climate change on the key habitat for these bears.”

“Finally protecting the Refuge as Wilderness makes sense right now,” said Sarah Wilhoite, Legislative Representative for Earthjustice. “Congress is on the right path toward passing legislation to reduce our oil consumption, increase our nation's energy efficiency, and reducing global warming gasses. They need to continue to focus on forward thinking energy legislation and take this non-starter proposal off the table.”

The introduction of the Arctic wilderness legislation complements Senator Lieberman's current efforts to pass into law the first major bi-partisan legislative proposal that would cap heat-trapping emissions from the largest contributors in the country.

Senators Joe Biden (D-DE), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Robert Casey (D-PA), Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Chris Dodd (D-CT), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Russ Feingold (D-WI), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Edward Kennedy (D-MA), John Kerry (D-MA), Herb Kohl (D-WI), Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Patty Murray (D-WA), Barack Obama (D-IL), Jack Reed (D-RI), Ken Salazar (D-CO), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) joined Senator Lieberman in introducing the bill.

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