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Deciding to Drill: Managing the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska in the Common Interest
Report on Summer Research Experience

With the generous support of the Class of 1964 Environmental Fellowship, I spent eight weeks this summer studying the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. The 23-million acre NPR-A is the largest tract of federal land in the United States. It lies west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Prudhoe Bay in Alaska's oil- and gas-rich North Slope region. The Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency responsible for managing the NPR-A, divided the area into three sections: northeast, northwest, and south. I focused my research on the 4.6 million acre northeast section, because the management of this area has been most contentious. The BLM opened a portion of the northeast section to oil and gas development in a 1998 Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement, and the agency opened even more of the area in a 2006 amendment to the 1998 document. A subsequent lawsuit by concerned conservation organizations forced the BLM to revise its 2006 analysis. In May 2008, the BLM released a supplement to the 2006 amendment that reversed many of the development expansions allowed in the 2006 amendment.

The broad goal of my research is to investigate whether the NPR-A is being managed in the common interest. To do so, I have tried to understand the social process surrounding the dispute over the NPR-A's management and the decision process used by the federal government, purportedly to resolve that dispute. My work is guided by several subsidiary questions: What groups are involved in the EIS process, and with what outcomes and effects? What demands do they make, based on what values and expectations? How does the BLM incorporate different perspectives into its analysis and management decisions? Are BLM officials able to describe

how they make decisions? What role does science play in the social and decision processes? How are scientific arguments used and misused by the different participants? Why did the BLM change its management strategies in 1998, 2006, and 2008? What social and political factors explain those changes? How do the Inupiaq Eskimos define the NPR-A policy problems? How do they participate in the debate? Are their voices being heard? In what ways does development help and hurt their well-being? Does oil and gas development affect their health, subsistence hunting, and cultural traditions? Are local and traditional knowledge collected and incorporated into the decision process? Will comprehensive development planning help mitigate the social, environmental, and political impacts of development?

To answer these questions, I used a methodology known as the policy sciences, a set of contextual, problem-oriented, and multi-method approaches to understanding the policy process. As the end of the spring semester and beginning of the summer, I engaged in a literature review, obtaining and reading relevant scientific articles, articles from local and national magazines and newspapers, integrated activities plans, environmental impact statements, records of decision, court decisions, and the transcriptions from public meetings about NPR-A. While in Alaska, I conducted interviews with 39 people representing about 25 unique organizations with a vested interest in the management of the NPR-A. A complete list of the interviews conducted is available in the appendix. During these semi-structured interviews, I asked the participants to explain their personal involvement in the NPR-A debates and to outline their organization's involvement and position over time. I then asked a series of more specific questions about science, decision making, cultural issues. Some questions were standardized across all participants, and others were unique depending on the context.

I lived in Anchorage for most of the summer, but I made occasional trips to surrounding cities and also spent several days in Fairbanks. Although I did some library research, I spent most of my time in Anchorage interviewing participants in the NPR-A policy dispute. I talked with government officials from the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Land Management, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Commission on Arctic Research. I also talked with representatives from several conservation organizations and oil companies, as well as from the Resource Development Council, North Slope Borough, the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, and the Kuukpik Village Corporation. As I expected, each participant in the case offered a different perspective on the NPR-A, placing emphasis on different facts and values and in some instances framing the issues using drastically different worldviews. These interviews provided a better functional understanding of the disputes that have taken place and placed these disputes in a fuller, more nuanced context better than any other method has done so for me.

I devoted the final two weeks of my time in Alaska to traveling across the Arctic. I first visited Prudhoe Bay, the largest oil field in the United States. The plane flights in and out provided a good sense of the scope of development. I walked through some of the production facilities and saw the first drill site, where ARCO discovered oil in 1968. I also learned about the area's history and current industry practices from workers and operators.

I then spent a week in Nuiqsut, a small native village of approximately 450 mostly Inupiaq Eskimo residents. I toured many of the town's facilities, including the power plant, school, community center, teen center, health clinic, water treatment facility, AC store, and Presbyterian church. I had countless informal conversations with residents on the streets. I also hired a local translator and interviewed five of the village's respected elders, most of whom have

a very limited ability to speak and understand English. They helped me understand how the Inupiaq culture has changed over time and offered a variety of explanations for and reactions to those changes. Speaking with the elders was one of my favorite experiences of the entire summer, and it provided a perspective on development and cultural change I could not have obtained in any other way. On my last night in Nuiqsut, I was invited to participate in an 18-hour *oogruk* (bearded seal) subsistence hunt in the Arctic Ocean. I saw first-hand how subsistence hunting works in the Arctic, from spotting and hunting the seals to preparing and eating the meat. I cannot imagine how I could ever understand the challenges and opportunities facing the Inupiat in general and the people of Nuiqsut in particular without witnessing such an important aspect of their way of life in person.

Finally, I spent several days in Barrow, the northernmost town in the United States and the borough seat of Alaska's North Slope Borough. I met with several members of the North Slope Borough staff, who helped me understand the Borough's perspective on oil and gas development in the NPR-A and shared with me the results of some studies conducted by the Borough's Wildlife Department.

Over the upcoming year, I will work to analyze my data, refine my research question, and develop conclusions and recommendations. I am confident that my experience this summer will greatly enrich my senior thesis in Environmental Studies. I am extremely grateful for the tremendous opportunity to design and conduct my own research project. This was my first opportunity to conduct social science research in the field, and my skills greatly improved over the course of the summer. I really enjoyed the change to live and travel alone and to meet with so many extremely interesting people. There are not many opportunities to do so as an undergraduate, and I believe the experience is invaluable. This summer was the most exciting,

educational, and enjoyable one I have had. Thank you again for helping to make this possible. I look forward to using what I have learned this summer in my professional career, where I hope to continue the search for creative, common-interest solutions to complicated policy problems.

Appendix: Alaska Interviews Summer 2008

Anchorage Area

1. **John Toppenberg** *Director, Alaska Wildlife Alliance*
2. **Hans Neidig** *Special Assistant to the Secretary for Alaska, Dept. of the Interior*
3. **Mead Treadwell** *Chair, U.S. Arctic Research Commission*
4. **Jennifer Hillman** *BLM Policy Analyst, Alaska Wilderness League*
5. **Jennifer Curtis** *NEPA Review/Compliance Officer, EPA-Alaska Operations Office*
6. **Pat Pourchot** *Senior Policy Representative, Audubon Alaska*
7. **Ted Murphy** *Deputy State Director, Division of Resources, BLM Alaska*
8. **Jim Ducker** *Environmental Program Analyst, BLM Alaska*
9. **Kurt Parkan** *Director of External Affairs, the Nature Conservancy*
10. **John Payne** *Executive Director, North Slope Science Initiative*
11. **Jason Brune** *Executive Director, Resource Development Council for Alaska*
12. **Carl Portman** *Deputy Director, Resource Development Council for Alaska*
13. **Rachel James** *Alaska Program Associate, Pacific Environment*
14. **Jason Bergerson** *Research Analyst, North Slope Borough*
15. **Jon Issacs** *Associate Planner and Director of Business Development, URS Corp.*
16. **Mark Hanley** *Manager, Public Affairs, Anadarko Petroleum Corporation*
17. **Tara Sweeney** *VP of External Affairs, Arctic Slope Regional Corporation*
18. **Lanston Chinn** *CEO, Kuukpik Corporation*
19. **Tom Lohman** *Attorney, North Slope Borough*
20. **Natalie Lowman** *Director of Communications, ConocoPhillips Alaska Inc.*

Fairbanks

21. **Lon Kelly** *Manager, Arctic Field Office, BLM Alaska*
22. **Bob Schneider** *Fairbanks District Manager, BLM Alaska*
23. **Jim Zelenak** *Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*
24. **Pamela A. Miller** *Arctic Issues Coordinator, Northern Alaska Environmental Center*

Nuiqsut

25. **Sam Kunaknana** *Mayor*
26. **Isaac Nukapigak** *President, Kuukpik Corporation*
27. **Heather Smith** *Pastor, Kuukpuk Presbyterian Church*
28. **Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak** *Community Activist*
29. **Eli Nukapigak** *City Council Member*
30. **Gina Rath** *City Administrator*
31. **Marjorie Ahnupkana** *Elder*
32. **Joe Ericklook** *Elder*
33. **Amy Taalak** *Elder*
34. **Annie Lampe** *Elder*
35. **Joe Kasak** *Elder*

Barrow

36. **Noah Ashley** *Wildlife Biologist, North Slope Borough*
37. **Brian Person** *Wildlife Biologist, North Slope Borough*
38. **Price Leavitt** *Executive Director, Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope*
39. **Glenn Sheehan** *Executive Director, Barrow Arctic Science*