

Kaktovik hearing sparks diverse ANWR statements

by Dave Elias

for the Tundra Times

KAKTOVIK — Several plane loads of visitors arrived from far away places under fairly clear skies and relatively warm weather here Tuesday to discuss the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

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Villagers generously provided an ample potluck dinner in the high school gym for their guests, including some highly prized muktuk and whale meat.

Later, more than 100 visitors and villagers gathered in a newly finished community hall for the second of three hearings conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concerning oil and gas leasing within the refuge.

This North Slope village, population 207, is on Barter Island at the edge of the Beaufort Sea. The village, the most eastern in the North Slope Borough, is about 400 miles north of Fairbanks and 300 miles east of Barrow.

Just south of here, in an area about 104 miles long and varying from 16 to 34 miles wide, are 1.55 million acres of land in which the Fish and Wildlife Service says there might be vast accumulations of oil.

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Among those who spoke at the ANWR hearing in Kaktovik was Herman Rexford, who delivered a statement for Arco Alaska Inc. in the Inupiat language. The Kaktovik hearing was the second of three such meetings held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other hearings were in Anchorage and Washington, D.C. Transportation for Tundra Times volunteer Dave Elias and photographer Norris Klesman was provided by Arco Alaska Inc.

photo by Norris Klesman

Villagers raise concerns about wildlife

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According to a report released by the agency in November, there is a 5 percent chance that as much as 9.2 billion barrels of recoverable oil could be found in what has become known as the "1002 area," named after section 1002 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The act defined the area to be studied and ordered the report.

That amount of oil is about the same as that contained in the giant Prudhoe Bay oil field. A 5 percent chance of finding that much oil is considered good by the oil industry.

At the hearing here, local people brought the whole family, and there were many babies. Testimony from the group was translated into Inupiat by Marie Adams from the North Slope Borough. Tape recorders, photographers and television crews recorded everything.

Loren Ahlers, Kaktovik mayor, led off with a statement from the City Council favoring an alternative which would allow partial leasing within the refuge.

He emphasized the concern to continue protection of the wildlife, particularly the habitat of the Porcupine Caribou Herd.

Partial leasing would exclude leasing the "core calving area" of the caribou herd, he said. His statement also addressed issues such as possible impacts to the Bowhead whale, subsistence hunting within the refuge and the potential for the development of social problems in Kaktovik accompanying development.

Ahlers rejected the idea of designating the 1002 area as wilderness.

Of all the extensive varieties of mammals, birds and fish found in and near the 1002 area, the greatest concern is with the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which includes about 180,000 animals.

According to the 1002 report, this herd uses the Coastal Plain in the spring as a calving area. During the summer months, the animals roam up the coast to escape hordes of insects.

But the herd moves through the fall and winter into adjoining regions — into Canada and back into Alaska — furnishing a primary subsistence resource to villages such as Old Crow in the Yukon Territory of Canada;



Dozens of people testified at the Fish and Wildlife Service hearing in Anchorage Jan. 5.

photo by Norris Klesman

Chalkyitsik, Arctic Village, Venetie and sometimes as far south as Fort Yukon in Alaska.

According to the report, many more caribou are taken by subsistence hunters outside Kaktovik than those taken by Kaktovik people. The 1002 report states that the size of the Porcupine Caribou Herd might be reduced as much as 20 to 40 percent if development occurs.

Representatives from the North Slope Borough and the Arctic Slope Regional Corp. spoke at the hearing in favor of full leasing.

Edward Itta, representing the North Slope Borough, said the opportunity for Native corporations to reap the benefits of oil production should not be denied and that this could be done while still maintaining the traditional subsistence food sources.

Warren Matumeak, borough land manager, pointed out that with proper treatment, the herd size would not diminish.

ASRC President Jacob Adams said the use of resources was a dynamic and changing process. It is best to combine the best elements of the cash and subsistence lifestyles, he said.

Adams also noted that views of the

owners of the 92,000 acres of prospective land on the Coastal Plain should be carefully considered, and he added that designation of the 1002 area as wilderness would be objectionable.

Dr. Robert Newell of Anchorage testified for Arco Alaska Inc., saying the environment did not have to suffer under development.

"The experience of the past 20 years has shown that oil and gas exploration and development on the North Slope does not result in deterioration of the environment," he said.

Others at the hearing from Old Crow, Arctic Village, Venetie and Fort Yukon were less optimistic about the protection of the caribou.

Old Crow representatives expressed their concern about the herd.

They said it was completely unacceptable to have a decrease in the size of the herd, and they raised concerns about the issue of possible loss of habitat quality in the calving grounds.

Several speakers from Arctic Village, Venetie and Fort Yukon expressed their doubts about preservation of subsistence resources.

Trimble Gilbert of Arctic Village asked how long the oil money would

last, referring to the subsistence lifestyle that has prevailed for thousands of years. Trimble said he did not even hear of the 1002 report until the day before.

Charlie Peter of Kaktovik stressed the need for cooperation.

The day before at a hearing in Anchorage, oil industry officials and those in favor of development dominated the day-long meeting at the Egan Civic & Convention Center.

At least 200 people attended, and well more than half testified.

The third hearing was held in Washington, D.C., Friday.