Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 25, 2021

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

We are writing to urge you to suspend any further action on the Willow Master Development Plan, a massive oil and gas project which represents and looming climate threat in the Alaskan Arctic, pending a comprehensive analysis of the compatibility of this project with our nation's climate change commitments.

The Willow Plan in the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (Reserve) was approved in the final months of the Trump Administration. This complex and far-reaching proposal would have significant impacts on the region and entire Reserve, particularly on the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, and due to the project's greenhouse gas emissions – our global climate.

The Willow Plan was on a path to being built until the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals imposed an injunction. Recently, the U.S. District Court in Alaska voided the Department of Interior's approvals for the project due to "serious errors" in the analysis of the project. We applaud the Biden Administration for declining to further defend the flawed Willow Plan in court as the deadline to appeal that decision came and went, and we were encouraged this week by the steps taken to undo the 2020 Integrated Activity Plan for the entire Reserve.

The Willow Plan is out of step with our nation's climate and conservation imperatives. Willow would produce up to 200,000 barrels of oil per day for at least 30 years, adding 260 million metric tons of CO_2 to the atmosphere. These numbers illustrate that this project is not consistent with the Administration's climate commitments and the need to limit warming to below 1.5 degrees Celsius. Now is not the time to be fast tracking permitting for a massive new oil development project. The Biden Administration can take a significant step toward achieving its national climate goals by using its authority to suspend activity on leases and reconsider its approach to evaluating the Willow Plan. Simply put, there is no room in the global climate budget for any more oil and gas development if we are to achieve our climate goals

We are also concerned by the harmful impacts that the Willow Plan could have on the unique ecological and subsistence values in the Reserve. The Reserve is home to many of our nation's Arctic treasures, including two large caribou herds, globally significant migratory bird populations, threatened polar bears, extraordinary complexes of lakes, ponds, rivers, floodplains, wetlands, and upland areas, and sensitive coastal resources. These values are central to the subsistence livelihood of local Indigenous communities and our nation's conservation heritage.

There are multiple Special Areas designated in the Reserve that seek to protect these values and resources.

Before the Department of Interior heads back to the drawing board on the Willow Plan, an opportunity exists to reconsider the Trump Administration's approvals of this project and ensure that any supplemental process fully complies with the National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act, as well as national and international policies regarding climate change and conservation.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) should be maintaining the strongest possible protections for Special Areas within the Reserve. Instead, the Willow Plan encroaches into the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, which has been protected for decades because of its ecological values. It also encroaches into the Colville River Special Area, which provides important nesting habitat for raptors and other birds, as well as being an area of subsistence activities for communities. Allowing development in Special Areas would leave lasting impacts to wildlife and the people who rely on them.

In addition to ensuring that any new development is consistent with our climate obligations, as the BLM moves forward to supplement the analysis for the Willow Plan, it must engage in a full review of the project's significant adverse effects and consideration of less harmful alternatives. Where the Trump Administration ignored local communities and failed to adequately address the risks to the health and safety of people, land, water, and wildlife, the Biden Administration must do better by creating a new standard that prioritizes meaningful tribal consultation, environmental justice, and a just and equitable transition away from a fossil fuel dependent economy. At a minimum, this requires BLM to engage in a public scoping process at the outset, and to fully evaluate new alternatives to the Willow Plan and its impacts, including alternatives that involve less development. Interior should not limit any review solely to deficiencies identified the District Court, and should fully reevaluate the project as a whole.

Recent steps to restore the 2013 Integrated Activity Plan are a positive step in this direction, but more is necessary in the year ahead to align management of the Reserve with our climate and biodiversity goals. Now is the time for the Department of Interior and the Administration to set out a new management direction for the Reserve. One that provides durable protections for the communities that rely on the Reserve, benefits the regions fragile biodiversity, and acts as a tool as a part of the solution to the climate crisis instead of part of the problem.

We thank the Department of Interior and the Administration for opting not to defend the Willow Plan in court. However, it is still critically important that the Department of Interior immediately freeze any further action on the Willow Master Development Plan and conduct a thorough review of project that fully incorporates the impacts to the region's environment as well as the global climate. We look forward to continuing to work with you toward our shared goals for the Arctic and our federal public lands.

Sincerely,

Alan Lowenthal
Chair, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources

Raúl M. Grijalva
Chair, House Natural Resources Committee

Jared Huffman
Chair, Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife

Joe Neguse
Chair, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, And Public Lands

Katie Porter
Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations