

Committee on Resources

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STATEMENT OF THE KAKTOVIK CITY COUNCIL

TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES RESOURCES COMMITTEE

CHAIRMAN RICHARD POMBO, PRESIDING

HEARING IN KAKTOVIK, ALASKA APRIL 5, 2003

As the only resident people of the Arctic Drainage from east of the Canadian border to west of the Canning River, and thus the entire northern portions of what has been called the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, we, the people of Kaktovik want to express our appreciation to the Mouse Resources Committee and especially to Chairman Pombo for coming hereto the very heart of the ANWR 1002 debate to hear the views of the people most directly affected in this matter.

For background on this issue and our place in it, we refer the Committee to consensus documents drawn up by the people of Kaktovik some years ago. These documents what we call "the Kaktovik Papers" and titled In This Place: A Guide to Those Wishing to Work in the Country of the Kaktovikmiut -- express our views not only on oil and gas development but also our view of the larger picture, our place in the scheme of things. The City Council recently reviewed these documents and confirmed that they remain current and consistent with their original objectives, to explain to others just how things are here. We recommend that anyone with any interest in these precious lands and waters that form the homelands of our people read and respect our views collected and expressed in these documents. We hope they will help those who do not understand that this part of the world is not the same seen from here as from other places. We believe our view of it is a valid, important and indeed a crucial one in this debate.

We urge the Committee to watch and respect the words of our people presented in our video also entitled: In This Place. We were driven to produce this video because what we saw on TV about us was so far off base that we could barely recognize ourselves in it. People with video cameras seemed, as if by magic, to record and then edit it selectively so that we ended up saying things we would never say. So we thought to try our hand at this magic, to see if it could be made to say what we really do think and feel. In This Place does that, and we put it forward as the real voices of Kaktovik.

Years ago, when the issue of oil exploration within the 1002 portion of the ANWR first came up, we were scattered on it. Some here thought it a bad idea, a terrible risk both to us and to the country on which we depend, the country that defines most of us as Native people. Some thought it a good idea because it would allow us to benefit from the petroleum resources that belong to us. As time went along, we watched with some suspicion the activity at Prudhoe Bay, but as we developed a working relationship with the petroleum industry, and as they did things the way we wanted them to do, we assessed the costs and the benefits of their being here on the North Slope and became increasingly comfortable both with the industry and with our ability to work with them. Today, nearly everyone here has moved towards the development side. It does not frighten us as it once did when we knew less about what it would be like, how the oil people would behave as neighbors and what the downside would be.

However, the consensus drawn up here by the City and people of Kaktovik should not be seen as an endorsement of anyone nor of any position held by others. That is not the way we are. We don't choose up sides, especially sides brought in from elsewhere. We have never spoken as partisans on this issue. We respect the concerns of everyone, even those with whom we disagree. Indeed, we have a few people here who are rather passionate in their opposition to development of the 1002. That is their right, and we respect them for making their point. Most of us think they are wrong, that they simply do not understand this place or its people, but we do listen to them and respect them.

Indeed, for anyone who really cares about this place, especially those who respect us and our place at the center of this debate, who recognize that nobody could possibly love this country more than we do, to them we reach out our hand and ask that they join with us to see that the things of value here are fully and

completely protected whatever happens.

To that end we have asked that any legislation drawn up to open the 1002 to development be written to allow our full and effective participation in both the development and the direction of that development. We hold that the best way to protect this country is to see that those of us who understand it best and care most about it are effectively empowered to aid and assist any who would work here, to see that they do things right. We have put such language forward and are now working with the staff of this Committee to assure that it becomes law.

Those who know us know that the Inupiat are a progressive people but a people with our feet solidly on the ground here. The ancestors of our people found this place empty and have survived here for thousands of years. The spirits of our people are here and will be here forever. They are hard-wired to this place. And we, the now living, intend to be here forever, never to leave our spirits behind. That is the point of all this, to survive here in this magnificent place that is so much a part of what we are, to protect it and to make the most of it. For us this is not a romantic dream, a respite for a week to get away from the mess people have made of other places, some cover for the awful things they have done elsewhere. No, we intend to stay right here and to keep sweet and whole both our people and this land to which we so firmly attach.

To those who can not see this, who see only emptiness here, who can not or will not recognize our shadows on the land, our footprints that are everywhere, who can not feel the spirits among us, all across this country and far out to sea, to those who deny our very being by declaring this a wilderness, to them we say this: Shame on you. Shame for trying to deny that we are here and that we exist. Shame for coming here and saying we do not matter. Shame for going into other Native communities and having them seem to say things no Native person would ever say about the homelands of another Native tribe. Shame. Shame. Shame.

We can live with the oil people. They will come and go. They listen to us and they have come to show us respect. Indeed, we can work with and accommodate any who come here and show us respect. But for those who come here to displace us with their own shallow visions and empty illusions, we must ask you to leave. This is not a place for you. This is no empty land and surely not a wilderness. We are here, even if you will not see us. And you shall never displace us.