

Scientist Letter to President Barack Obama: Protect U.S. Arctic Important Marine Areas

June 16, 2016

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The Arctic is home to vibrant communities of indigenous peoples, provides vital marine habitats for iconic wildlife such as beluga whales, walrus, and ice seals found nowhere else in the United States, and plays a critical role in global climate systems. As you witnessed during your trip to Alaska this past summer, the region is profoundly affected by climate change—including loss of sea ice, acidification of the ocean, and increased access for industries that pose significant risks to the ocean environment. Careful planning and management can help protect and sustain this valuable ecosystem in the face of these and other threats.

We applaud the leadership you showed in 2015 by withdrawing 9.8 million acres of the Beaufort and Chukchi seas from future oil and gas leasing. This important action to conserve parts of the U.S. Arctic Ocean was a significant step toward protecting Arctic marine ecosystems. We are encouraged by your comprehensive joint vision for the Arctic with Prime Minister Trudeau, which includes taking steps to conserve Arctic biodiversity through science-based decision-making.

As scientists and natural resource managers, we support additional steps to protect vital habitats in the Arctic Ocean. More action is needed to ensure the resilience of the Arctic marine ecosystem and sustain the people who use its living resources to thrive. No new oil and gas leasing or exploration should be allowed in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas in the foreseeable future, including in the next five-year leasing plan. Additional ecologically important and sensitive marine habitats should be placed off-limits to oil and gas activity, while honoring subsistence hunting, fishing, and other uses and access for indigenous peoples, to protect the long-term health and function of these waters.

We know your administration is committed to ensuring sound, science-based decision-making. It is clear that certain offshore areas—often those with durable physical or oceanographic attributes—make critically important contributions to ecosystem functioning and subsistence. Most or all of these areas can be expected to remain productive and essential to ecosystem well-being even as climate change continues to reduce sea ice, alter the food web, and otherwise affect Arctic waters. As you yourself have said, “some areas are too special to drill.”

Beyond those areas you already have withdrawn from oil and gas leasing, there are additional places that warrant consideration because they encompass especially diverse habitats, support high species richness, provide habitat for wildlife during critical life stages, host extraordinary productivity, or otherwise sustain the resilience of the Arctic marine ecosystem. Examples are long-established migration routes for seabirds and bowhead whales, foraging hotspots, subsistence use areas, rich seafloor habitats, lingering ice habitat, and areas where algae and phytoplankton thrive.

We, the undersigned, ask you to remove the two Arctic planning areas, which together comprise nearly the entire U.S. Chukchi and Beaufort seas, from the 2017–2022 Outer Continental Shelf Leasing Program. We further ask that you consult with indigenous communities and tribes, who have extensive traditional knowledge relevant to decision-making, and with Arctic scientists to identify and permanently withdraw additional important marine areas to promote a sustainable, resilient future for this extraordinary ecosystem.

Sincerely,

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