

Statement from Maine Faith Leaders on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

We urge you to support repealing the mandate to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and work to provide permanent protection for this sacred place and its inhabitants. As Maine religious leaders, we are in awe and are grateful for God's bountiful and good creation. Our gratitude extends beyond our state's boundaries to include places such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a special part of God's creation that stands alone in its wilderness, ecological integrity and beauty.

We stand in solidarity with the Gwich'in people who rely on this sacred landscape, the Arctic Refuge, for their experience of the holy and their survival as a people. The Gwich'in people, many of whom are Episcopalian, depend upon the Porcupine Caribou, their primary food source, to maintain their culture and way of life. The Gwich'in are so spiritually tied to the land and Porcupine Caribou that they refer to the birthing grounds for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, as "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" or "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

We confess that over the centuries we have fallen well short of our responsibility to ensure justice and peace for our indigenous brothers and sisters.

We confess that we have walked a path of unsustainable lifestyles that have wreaked havoc on the climate, the waters and the land. We know that through our current actions we are not ensuring a healthy planet for future generations.

As we hear the urgent cry of Earth and God calls us to care for all creation and creatures, we feel responsible to protect sacred places like the Arctic Refuge and its native peoples. We must mend the shattered covenant to care for our neighbor. We must become the ecological stewards that God requires of us and ensure that the wilderness that is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge remains intact.

Attending to the common good compels us to work tirelessly to protect the remaining pieces of God's wilderness and to stand alongside the Gwich'in people and their way of life. We urge you to support repealing the mandate to drill in the Arctic Refuge and work to provide permanent protection for this sacred place and its inhabitants.

Drilling in the Arctic Refuge, as currently prescribed by Congress, will shatter the gifts of creation, disrupt the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou, and in turn devastate the food security of the Gwich'in people. In the Bible, Proverbs declares that the wise see danger and avoid it, while the fool carries on. The 2020 failure of the first Arctic Refuge lease sale to generate revenue and interest from fossil fuel companies should urge Congress to seek a wiser road and renounce oil development in the Arctic Refuge.

The best course would be to invest in protecting the Gwich'in, a community that has been living in sustainable relationship with the Arctic Refuge and the Porcupine Caribou for 30,000 years. We should allow the Gwich'in people to hold fast to the free exercise of their faith and to continue their traditional way of life.

Drilling in the Arctic is not only a local issue, it impacts us all. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report released this week provides unequivocal evidence that burning fossil fuels must stop in order to sustain life on the planet and address climate change. Recent droughts, fires and floods are all evidence that God's earth has warmed to dangerous levels. The Arctic Refuge itself has experienced a 5-7 degree increase in temperature over the past 50 years.

The health and safety of God's children worldwide, including the Gwich'in, depend on ending the use of fossil fuels and leaving the Arctic Refuge oil in the ground. The current budget reconciliation process offers a unique and timely opportunity to rescind the authorization to drill in the Arctic Refuge.

Drafters:

Rabbi Jean Berman, Peaks Island

Rev. Dr. Bill Gregory, United Church of Christ (retired), Yarmouth Maine

Dr. Dieter Hessel, Presbyterian minister, Cape Elizabeth

Sue Inches, Earth Stewardship Team, First Parish Yarmouth

Rev. Rich Killmer, Presbyterian Church USA, Yarmouth

Rabbi Daniel Swartz, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life