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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 21, 2009

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Nearly 300,000 Citizens Ask Secretary Salazar To Protect Alaska's Offshore Waters

Public overwhelmingly calls for halt to proposed drilling in Arctic Ocean, Bristol Bay

WASHINGTON, DC - In an unprecedented outpouring of support for two of our nation's greatest natural treasures, nearly 300,000 people asked Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to stop oil and gas activities in America's Arctic at this time and permanently protect Alaska's Bristol Bay. Hundreds of thousands of concerned citizens submitted comments on a proposed new offshore drilling plan pushed through by the Bush administration in its last days in office, which opens up virtually the entire Arctic Ocean and 5.6 million acres of prime habitat in Bristol Bay to oil and gas development.

These public comments were symbolically presented today to Secretary Salazar at the Department of the Interior in Washington. The public comment period – extended to 180 days by Sec. Salazar when he took office in February – ends today.

“The American public has unequivocally said that Bush's aggressive plans for oil and gas development have no place in America's Arctic and Bristol Bay,” said Cindy Shogan, executive director of Alaska Wilderness League. “Secretary Salazar pledged to make wise decisions based on sound information. We urge him to continue the process he has begun, and come up with a rigorous plan that ensures the survival of these two national treasures.”

In addition to the support demonstrated by the general public, more than 400 scientists from the U.S. and 20 other countries sent a letter to the Obama administration stating that Bush's plan was created without sufficient scientific understanding of environmental consequences for these unique, fragile seas – and without full consultation with indigenous residents.

“We still have a chance to do it right in the Arctic. All we're really asking is that we look before we leap,” said Dr. Jeffrey Short, Pacific science director for Oceana and former National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration research chemist. “The letter to the administration from over 400 scientists from the U.S. and around the world exemplifies the clear need for a better understanding of Arctic Ocean and for science to guide the decisions about if oil and gas activities should occur, and if so, when, where, and how.”

The people of the Arctic Slope and Bristol Bay, who have lived off the bounty from these abundant waters for thousands of years, also spoke out about the impacts of the proposed drilling on ecosystems already under great stress from climate change.

“I am really against oil drilling in the Arctic. Not for 75 percent, but absolutely for 100 percent. No drilling,” said Alice Weber, an 87-year-old Inupiat woman from Point Hope, Alaska, which is surrounded on three sides by the Arctic Ocean. **“We are worried. I try not to miss any meeting about oil, about whaling. Whenever I can, I raise my voice.”**

America’s Arctic Ocean is home to vibrant communities and abundant marine life: polar bears, walrus, ice seals, whales and much more. The Inupiat people call the Arctic Ocean their garden. They have lived off its bounty for thousands of years. Bristol Bay is home to the world’s largest wild run of sockeye salmon. The Bristol Bay region provides more than 40 percent of the total U.S. fish catch and is of global ecological importance for fish, seabirds, waterfowl and marine mammals. In addition, several Alaska Native communities rely on the abundant natural resources of this region to sustain their traditional way of life.

“Why risk the collapse of fisheries that benefit all of America for the sake of two lease sales that benefit oil companies?” said Tom Dillon, senior vice president of Field Programs at World Wildlife Fund. **“Government estimates confirm that fish from Bristol Bay are worth more than oil - and fish are a renewable resource.”**

The Arctic ecosystem depends on sea ice to thrive. As climate change ravages the region – the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world – this sea ice melts at a rapid pace. Scientists now predict that summer sea ice could be gone as early as 2013. Industrial development in these waters will only compound these impacts.

“Oil and gas development would add another stressor to an ecosystem already severely challenged by the rapid pace of global warming,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, acting director of The Wilderness Society’s Alaska regional office. **“Too little is understood about the effects that oil and gas exploration development would have on the fragile marine ecosystems of the Arctic Ocean and Bristol Bay. We must have a better scientific understanding of this region before we undertake industrial development in Arctic waters.”**

The Arctic is the “least studied and most poorly understood place in the world,” according to the U.S. Arctic Commission. Thus the full range of impacts from development is unknown. One thing we do know is that there is currently no technology that exists to clean up an oil spill in the Arctic’s icy conditions. Once the drills start, government scientists have predicted a 40 percent chance of one or more large oil spills in the Chukchi Sea alone.

This plan for expanded offshore development is in addition to the controversial, current oil and gas leasing program, which opened 80 million acres in the Arctic Ocean to oil and gas development. The Alaska portion of the current plan is on hold after the United States District Court for the District of Columbia directed Secretary Salazar to redo the environmental sensitivity analysis in the Arctic Ocean.

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