

## Hearing on HJR No. 12

March 24, 2021

### Statement of Matthew Rexford

President of Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation

and

Tribal Administrator of Native Village of Kaktovik

Quyanaq, Chairman Revak and other members of the Senate Resources Committee present today for the invitation to speak and support **HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 12** opposing designation of National Monument status to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, more commonly known as ANWR, or the Refuge.

My name is Matthew Rexford and I represent the community of Kaktovik, the only community inside the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and more importantly, the only community inside the Coastal Plain area of ANWR. As you may be aware, I testified before House Resources on March 1<sup>st</sup>. My testimony today will be very different– I am angry, and my community is angry, and I want you in the legislature and elsewhere around the State to also become angry! We, the Iñupiat, are a people that work to resolve conflict, a people who try to work together, a people that values humility. All of this to say that for us to become angry is extraordinary.

Last week, the Washington Post published an Opinion Article that is a continuation of the onslaught that my community has been subjected to by the Gwich'in Steering Committee, who have been trying to erase the Inupiat from the lands we have lived on for thousands of years in the name of “racial justice” and “human rights”! The article, titled “Indigenous advocacy transformed the fight over oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge” is a slap in the face to my people. Nowhere does the article mention the Iñupiat people or Kaktovik – not once! This is the same experience we had with Congress in 2019 and the introduction of the bill H. R. 1146 titled “Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act,” which was

characterized as human rights legislation, but failed to even mention our people. It is appalling that our own U.S. Congress tried to eliminate us through legislation. In September 2020, we found that the Gwich'in Steering Committee approached the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination claiming they were racially discriminated against by the U.S. government during the Coastal Plain EIS. Like the Washington Post article of last week – neither H.R. 1146 nor the Gwich'in Steering Committee's complaint to the UN mentioned the Inupiat or Kaktovik. Can you imagine what that feels like to my people? And where do we get help fighting this? We are a small community of several hundred people on the northern shore of Alaska, we do not have the same resources supporting us– we do not have the millions of dollars that the environmental groups provide to the Gwich'in in a clear effort to erase our existence! **WE ARE MAD!**

We have endured being removed from our homelands many times since the 1940's when the US Airforce bulldozed our village, not once **BUT 3 TIMES**, over a time period of 10 years, for a Distance Early Warning site on Barter Island. My forefathers were subjected to Iodine studies by the military in an effort to understand how we could withstand living in the harsh Arctic climate we call home. We never received an apology, reparation, nor restitution for all the hardships we faced with our new neighbors.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1974 (ANCSA) was supposed to allow our Kaktovik Inupiat Corporation (KIC) the economic freedoms to develop its lands to benefit our community. While our leadership was the only Native group to speak out against ANCSA, when the Act passed, we again tried to make it work, inviting the oil and gas industry into our community and establishing an economy that has allowed our people to flourish for decades. In fact, the only well drilled inside of ANWR was drilled on KIC lands. Unfortunately, our “economic freedoms” were short-lived, and we lost those freedoms under the next piece of federal legislation, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1987 (ANILCA).

This act compromised KIC's ability to access and develop its lands. Kaktovik did not want to be an island in the middle of a Refuge, but it happened anyway. Having lived in the Refuge since the passage ANILCA, I am here to tell you that

life has been difficult, and the federal management agency has not performed its duty to our community as required by law. We would not expect that to change if ANWR was designated a national monument. In fact, we would expect to see our rights further restricted.

I want to be clear to the committee today that passage of this resolution is not going to affect or change the national opinion of ANWR – not unless you start fighting against the falsehoods that the Gwich'in Steering Committee has been so successful in presenting. My community of Kaktovik does what it can to counter the perception that the Coastal Plain is only sacred to caribou. The Coastal Plain is sacred to the Kaktovikmiut – **OUR ANCESTORS ARE BURIED HERE AND OUR CHILDREN GROW UP HERE.** To be clear, the Gwich'in Steering Committee are not a tribe, they are an advocacy group based in Fairbanks, Alaska – which is over 400 miles away from our village! It is the Iñupiat not the Gwich'in these lands are sacred to! See attached map for reference of distances to this testimony.

This fight has been relentless, and so I am here today at your invitation to support your opposition to turning ANWR into a national monument. You will have many speak on the importance of oil and gas to our national security and economy, and that we need jobs. While all of that is true, until you help us fight the rhetoric that the Gwich'in Steering Committee is sowing nationally and internationally – then this joint resolution will not mean much.

I implore this committee to officially recognize Kaktovik as the only community in the coastal plain and the Iñupiat as those who have occupied it for thousands of years. But just acknowledging us is not enough. Today, I ask this committee to take action to prevent further discrimination of the Kaktovikmiut. I'm asking for a bill that makes it illegal for a tribe to knowingly assert false land claims over another tribe's land.

Please provide us with some relief from this continued assault. This is OUR homeland, and we are not going anywhere. The Kaktovik Iñupiat strongly support responsible development to secure an economic future for our people. Simply pretending that the Iñupiat don't exist is alarming and offensive, but claiming our land is yours should be illegal, and this committee can help.

***We are angry, and I hope that you are now angry with us.*** I request that you support HJR No. 12. I ask that you consider legislation that prevents others tribes from suffering at the hands of their neighbors by addressing false land claims. And I ask that you stand and fight with the people of Kaktovik for the rights we were guaranteed so many decades ago.

Thank you for your time and the invitation to testify.

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