

**The Wilderness Society • Northern Alaska Environmental Center •
REDOIL • Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Government**

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**CONSERVATION, NATIVE GROUPS OPPOSE PROPOSED LAND SWAP
FOR OIL DEVELOPMENT IN YUKON FLATS REFUGE IN ALASKA**
Groups Blast USFWS for Failing to Protect Wildlife and Alaska Native Culture

Anchorage, AK—A coalition of Alaska native and conservation groups, joined by a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, denounced a proposed land swap that would remove 110,000 acres of critical and irreplaceable wildlife habitat and wilderness from the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to allow oil and gas development on the land. The coalition responded to a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) posted yesterday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

In 2004 the USFWS and the Doyon corporation reached an initial agreement to trade 110,000 acres of refuge land plus subsurface title to another 97,000 refuge acres for approximately 150,000 acres owned by Doyon. Doyon is interested in exploring and drilling for oil and gas and would likely seek to acquire additional refuge lands for expanded operations in the future.

The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, encompassing 11 million acres in eastern interior Alaska, includes some of the most productive Arctic wildlife habitat in North America. The wetlands, river floodplains, and forested lowlands of the refuge support the highest density of breeding ducks in Alaska, along with three species of salmon and hundreds of other birds, mammals, and fish species. Native Gwich'in and Koyukon Athabascan people have relied on these resources for thousands of years, and subsistence activities continue to define the cultural and social fabric of the eight native villages located in and near the Refuge.

“The Gwich'in people of the Yukon Flats have been dependent on the resources provided by this land for thousands of years. We are not willing to jeopardize this close relationship in exchange for a few jobs,” stated Dacho Alexander, First Chief of the Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribe in Fort Yukon. “We are acutely aware that even a minor spill could have devastating effects on the fragile ecosystem, not only here in the Yukon Flats, but along the entire Yukon watershed. We do not want to add to the effects of global warming which we are already experiencing firsthand. Therefore we will continue to protect our paradise from encroachment just as we have for the past thirty thousand years.”

“The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge constitutes the largest, most biologically productive boreal forest wetlands in North America,” said Fran Mauer, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist opposed to the land exchange. “This proposed land swap scheme violates the most fundamental purposes of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. It will destroy the integrity of this vast and important ecosystem, and set the stage for development within other conservation areas in Alaska. If this land exchange proceeds, nothing will be safe.”

“Oil and gas development are not compatible with the purposes for which the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge was established,” said Nicole Whittington-Evans, Director of The Wilderness Society’s Alaska Refuge Program. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service itself has acknowledged this in the past. Development poses a threat to water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, subsistence cultures, and the wilderness and recreational values of the refuge and its adjacent public lands.”

“Alaskans know all too well about the negative consequences of oil and gas development and decisions moving forward without the appropriate environmental studies and safeguards,” said Pamela Miller, Arctic Coordinator of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center. “The oil industry’s relentless drive to expand—aided and abetted by an Administration determined to give them whatever they want no matter what the consequences—is what we have seen on the North Slope and what we can expect for Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge if this proposal is allowed to move forward.”

Faith Gemmill of REDOIL (Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands) noted that “Native communities in the area have opposed this plan for years, and have gone to the Doyon board to express their opposition. Last year at Doyon’s Annual meeting, a voice vote of Doyon shareholders even voted the land trade down. We have seen the serious consequences not only to the land and the wildlife, but to the health and subsistence livelihood of native people on Alaska’s North Slope. The native people who live in and around the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge cannot afford similar risks to their health and their way of life. This plan is a bad idea, and should not proceed.”

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