

Leads Group of 20 House Members in Urging Secretary Salazar to Break from Previous Administration's Policies & Safeguard Precious Acres

Washington, DC - With Interior Secretary Ken Salazar expected to make important decisions concerning oil and gas development in environmentally sensitive parts off the coast of Alaska, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today led a group of 20 House members in urging the secretary to break from the policies of the previous administration and safeguard precious Arctic acres from drilling. Salazar will soon determine whether to defend in court the Bush administration's efforts to open up the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas and Bristol Bay off the coast of Alaska for drilling.

"We respectfully suggest that you take full advantage of the opportunity which has been provided to break from the Bush administration's rush to commit these sensitive, rapidly changing regions to oil and gas development and to demonstrate to the American people that the new administration at the Department of the Interior is indeed doing business differently," Hinchey and his 19 House colleagues wrote in a letter sent today to Salazar. "You and the Department have a rare opportunity to change direction, to follow the principles you have so admirably and publicly embraced, and to establish clearly that the old ways of doing business are gone. We hope you will keep your options open by not defending decisions made by the Bush administration, so that we can finally change course in the Arctic.

The waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas and Bristol Bay off of Alaska are at significant risk from climate change and the previous administration's ill-planned industrial activity. In the next few days, Secretary Salazar will have to make a set of important decisions regarding oil and gas activity in the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Those forthcoming decisions are in the context of lawsuits challenging the Bush administration's 2007-2012 offshore leasing plan with regard to these waters, a separate legal challenge to Chukchi Lease Sale 193, and an exploratory drilling plan for the Beaufort Sea submitted by Shell Oil on May 7 to replace a previous, illegally approved plan. These lawsuits were brought by Alaskan natives to protect their subsistence cultures, including federally recognized tribal governments, and conservation groups.

"While we work to craft solutions to global warming, we also need to make sure we do not follow the environmentally risky course the Bush administration charted for industrial development in these fragile and unique northern waters," Hinchey said.

Joining Hinchey in sending the letter to Secretary Salazar were: Congressman Howard Berman (D-CA), Congresswoman Lois Capps (D-CA), Congressman Steve Cohen (D-TN), Congressman Sam Farr (D-CA), Congressman Bob Filner (D-CA), Congressman Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL), Congressman Rush Holt (D-NJ), Congressman Michael Honda (D-CA), Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA), Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-MN), Congressman Ed Markey (D-MA), Congressman Jim Moran (D-VA), Congresswoman Grace Napolitano (D-CA), Congressman John Olver (D-MA), Congressman Jared Polis (D-CO), Congressman Pete Stark (D-CA), Congresswoman Niki Tsongas (D-MA), and Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA).

###

The full text of the letter from Hinchey and his colleagues to Secretary Salazar follows:

May 22, 2009

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
United States Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We commend your ongoing efforts to reform federal oil and gas leasing so that decisions reflect sound, up-to-date science, protect the public's interest, and comply fully with the law. Over the next several days you will have to make a set of important decisions regarding oil and gas activity in the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort seas in the context of litigation challenging activities set in motion by the Bush administration. We respectfully suggest that you take full advantage of the opportunity which has been provided to break from the Bush administration's rush to commit these sensitive, rapidly changing regions to oil and gas development and to demonstrate to the American people that the new administration at the Department of the

Interior is indeed doing business differently.

The decisions you face come in the context of lawsuits challenging your predecessor's 2007-2012 offshore leasing plan, a separate legal challenge to Chukchi Lease Sale 193, and a plan submitted by Shell Oil on May 7 to replace a previous, illegally approved plan. Although they arise in separate lawsuits over separate decisions, all the decisions were part of an overall plan or practice to push oil and gas development in the American Arctic without regard to the known science, without respect for the gaps in scientific data, and, as a result, without regard to the environmental, cultural, and economic consequences. With this mind, we hope you will consider taking the following actions:

Accept the DC Circuit Court's decision on the 2007 to 2012 Offshore Leasing Program as it applies to the Beaufort Sea, Chukchi Sea, and North Aleutian Basin planning areas, thus eliminating pending lease sales and voiding existing leases sold under Lease Sale 193 in the Chukchi Sea, and urge you to ensure the revised environmental sensitivity analysis is conducted in a manner that utilizes factors and scientific information relevant to these unique northern waters. We recommend that you include a full analysis of the Beaufort Sea, Chukchi Sea, and Bering Sea in your efforts on the new 5 year plan before making any decisions about this area going forward;

Not defend the Bush administration's position in separate litigation regarding Lease Sale 193 in the Chukchi Sea. This lease sale went forward despite acknowledged information gaps about the Chukchi Sea. The DC Circuit Court's opinion in the Leasing Program case emphasized the importance of having this information at the lease sale stage, further pointing to the weakness of the previous administration's decision to proceed with this sale;

Put science first, and prepare a full environmental impact statement that adequately analyzes and discloses the potentially significant effects of Shell's proposed drilling plan for 2010 in the Beaufort Sea on wildlife and Alaska Native subsistence. In 2007, your predecessor fast-tracked approval of a three-year plan by Shell to drill in the same area, failing to conduct an adequate analysis of the potential impacts of the drilling, and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals later enjoined the plan.

You and the Department have a rare opportunity to change direction, to follow the principles you have so admirably and publicly embraced, and to establish clearly that the old ways of doing business are gone. We hope you will keep your options open by not defending decisions made

by the Bush administration, so that we can finally change course in the Arctic.

Sincerely yours,

Maurice Hinchey & his 19 House colleagues