

**Testimony of Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak  
United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
Subcommittee on Energy and Power  
Hearing on H.R. \_\_\_\_\_**

April 13, 2011

Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing. My name is Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak and I have lived on the coast of the Arctic Ocean for most of my life. I recently moved to Barrow, Alaska from Nuiqsut, Alaska, an Inupiat community on the Arctic's Beaufort Sea coast. In Nuiqsut, I served as mayor, council member, tribal council member, school advisory council member, subsistence advisory board member and a longtime community health aide. I also have served as a council member for the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, an Alaska Native regional tribal government that represents the interests of the Inupiat people of the Arctic Slope region and as a council member for the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council (AITC). I am a founding member of the non-profit organization Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL). I am testifying on behalf of Alaska Wilderness League.

I am here to tell you how oil and gas development affects those of us who live on the Arctic Slope. The bill you are considering, to allow the oil industry to sidestep regulations on pollution as set forth by the Clean Air Act, will have a devastating impact on my people, who have called the Arctic home for thousands of years. If you allow this bill to move forward, you are telling me and everyone who lives in the Arctic that we – proud Inupiat and Americans – are less important than a few foreign-owned oil companies like Shell Oil.

The Clean Air Act has saved more than 200,000 lives and prevented millions of asthma attacks, heart problems and other serious illnesses. Those deaths weren't prevented, those illnesses weren't averted and those kids weren't saved because the EPA went door to door to polluters and said "Pretty please won't you clean up." Lives are saved and health improved when we let the experts at the agency responsible for making sure our air and water are clean and safe set the standards and then hold polluters accountable.

I live a very traditional lifestyle -- hunting, fishing, whaling, gathering, and teaching my family and community members the traditional and cultural activities as my elders taught me. I am a mother and grandmother with one daughter, four sons, five granddaughters, and four grandsons. As I teach the future generations our traditional ways, I can only hope that they will continue to be Inupiat – and not just residents in an industrialized area destroyed by Shell's offshore oil drilling.

The village where I raised my family, Nuiqsut, is located west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Prudhoe Bay oil fields, near the Beaufort Sea coast in the Colville River delta. Nuiqsut is currently surrounded by oil pipelines from the Alpine oil field less than four miles away. When the Alpine oil field was first proposed to be built next to our village, we were promised jobs and a small industrial footprint. Now the footprint has grown to over 570 acres. What's more, only a handful of villagers work in the oil fields, and the yellow haze can be seen for miles and miles. Currently, nitrogen oxide emissions from the oil fields are more than twice the total emitted in Washington, D.C. During winter there are many natural gas flares. As a result, I had spent many busy nights on call responding to community members' complaints about respiratory illnesses.

When I started my career as a health aide in 1986 there was only one asthmatic patient - when I quit in 1997 there were 60 people who had to use respiratory medications. For this village of more than 400 people, a 600 percent increase in respiratory patients should get some type of response. Yet our voices continue to be ignored.

Air pollution isn't the only problem. We have water quality changes, land use conflicts, oil spills, noise pollution, increased traffic and disturbance to fish and wildlife species. And the social fabric of the community is under stress. Truancy, vandalism, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse and suicide are all increasing.

These impacts from onshore development are a harbinger of what could come with proposed offshore drilling. Shell and other oil companies already hold leases that are next to several Arctic Slope communities such as Kaktovik. What's more, it's been well documented that air pollution

travels long distances – and Shell’s 2009 application for drilling permits showed that operations in the Arctic’s Chukchi Sea could cause significant health impacts to Arctic Slope communities. The Inupiat culture is intricately tied to the Arctic Ocean. We spend much of our time on the water – fishing, hunting and otherwise feeding our families. Our people have used the Arctic Ocean since time immemorial for our subsistence practices. We don’t stay on land.

The Inupiat people depend on the animals of the land and the sea to live and thrive. We eat various birds, including ptarmigan, ducks and geese; fish, including char, salmon, whitefish, dolly varden, grayling, pike, trout, and cisco; land mammals, including caribou, moose and muskox; and marine mammals, including bearded seals, walrus, beluga and bowhead whales. We harvest berries, plants roots and herbs. We work together in harvesting plants and animals. We have extensive sharing traditions that unite our families and communities. Other communities share their harvest with my family and we share our harvest with others. These sharing patterns have given us much of the variety of foods that we eat. We also share our harvest with those in need. The land, sea and air provide for us through the long, dark winters. We need them to survive, as the jobs around us often go to outsiders.

Our food sources have undergone great changes since oil development has surrounded us. Seismic vibrators looking for oil and frequent helicopter flights have disturbed the caribou herds where I live. The migration used to come right into town but the caribou do not come through Nuiqsut anymore, and most of our hunters have found it takes many trips to harvest caribou. What’s more, more of our people are seeing changes to our animals showing signs of illness. I travelled to all the North Slope villages last year before touring the spill and many shared concerns from the lemmings in Pt. Lay to the seals in Barrow, Wainwright and Pt. Hope. All villages expressed concern to traditional and cultural activities changed by the activities for oil and gas exploration and then development.

Fish have been decreasing in numbers, and multiple species are being affected. Fish caught in our nets have been deformed and yellow or have been found with increased parasites or tumors in the muscle or reproductive glands. Some are skinny and taste bitter.

More than anything else, Inupiat communities across the Arctic coast of Alaska depend on bowhead whales for subsistence food. Our culture is tied intimately with the whales and the sea. Nuiqsut whalers hunt for bowhead whales in the Beaufort Sea during the fall. We await the migration of the whales from Camden Bay for this hunt. The crews go to Cross Island in August. Our family helps with the preparations and receives a share of the harvest.

Shell's proposals to drill for oil and gas in the Chukchi and Beaufort Sea could cause great harm to the bowhead whales. Shell's exploration drilling, icebreaking, aircraft and helicopter flights, and other noisy activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas will keep whales from their feeding areas or otherwise harm them.

We educate our families that a whale hunt must be respectful and quiet. If the noise from Shell's drilling and icebreaking causes whales to be farther offshore, I am concerned that this would and put our whalers at greater risk. We have been taught not to put things in the water that may cause the whales to turn away from the hunting grounds. I fear that water discharges from drillships or the presence of drilling muds in the water where Shell conducts its activities will cause whales to avoid our hunting grounds.

If the whale hunts are less successful, I fear that the community will suffer, as it has in the past during times of shortage. To give an example, in the early 1990s there were seismic activities and exploration drilling in Camden Bay that severely affected our whaling. The following winter, there was an unusually high rate of domestic violence in Nuiqsut and increases in suicide attempts and in suicides. We also experienced increases in drug and alcohol use as well. As a community health aide, I listened to people's stories of how difficult it was to hunt without success. That winter was the worst I spent as a community health aide.

Our way of life could be destroyed in an instant if Shell were to drill and cause a large oil spill. Last year, I traveled to the Gulf of Mexico to learn more about the communities, animals and ecosystems impacted by that tragic oil spill. I returned, having witnessed the trauma of the people who felt the devastation to that area. That trip is a strong burden that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. It brought tears to my eyes – fumes of the spill were permeating the air. It got

into our clothes into our nose into our hair. As we traveled out into the water it only got worse. The people living down there had no escape – the natural smell of the ocean was nonexistent.

The Arctic's extreme conditions and isolation make it nearly impossible to clean up an oil spill. All this is widely known, yet the federal government is still allowing the oil industry to push forward with aggressive drilling plans as if disasters like last year's Gulf of Mexico spill or the Exxon Valdez spill 22 years ago in Prince William Sound never happened. If it is allowed to happen in the Arctic, my home, my culture, my people will be destroyed forever.

The Arctic Ocean is our garden. For thousands of years, we have stood watch over this garden and the animals that live in it. I ask you now, please don't keep us from fulfilling our sacred duty to protect this place and pass it on to our future generations.