

**Statement of Dr. Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak, Mayor, City of Nuiqsut,
to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on
Energy and Mineral Resources hearing on H.R. 8802, the Public Lands and Waters
Climate Leadership Act of 2022**

September 20, 2022

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Stauber, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of the Public Lands and Waters Climate Leadership Act of 2022, H.R. 8802

Good morning, my name is Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak. I am Iñupiat and am currently a member of the Native Village of Barrow. I was formerly a member of the Native Village of Nuiqsut. I have lived in Nuiqsut for over 35 years. I was born in Fairbanks, and also lived in Utqiagvik for eleven years. I moved back to Nuiqsut in 2016 and am currently the Mayor of Nuiqsut. I also worked as a health aide for fourteen years in Nuiqsut.

Today I am here to talk with you about the impacts that climate change and oil and gas development are having on our community and to press for action to combat climate change. This is about more than one specific bill or one specific project. My goal is making sure Nuiqsut survives into the future as an Iñupiat community. That is the biggest concern we have as Iñupiat.

I live a very traditional lifestyle hunting, fishing, whaling, and gathering plants and berries on the lands and waters around my community. I have taught my family and my community members to live the same subsistence lifestyle that was instilled in me by my elders. We hunt and eat various birds, fish, land mammals, especially caribou, and marine mammals, including seals and whales. In the winter, we go ice fishing on the rivers around Nuiqsut and on Teshekpuk Lake. Fishing is very important to my family, so protecting our rivers and streams from industrial activities and damage is really important to me. In our traditional way, animals, lands and waters are revered and treated with the utmost respect. We work together in harvesting plants and animals and sharing the harvest.

I have family living in villages across the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska: Wainwright, Utqiagvik, Atkasuk, and Nuiqsut. We have extensive sharing traditions that unite and bind our families and communities, including extended family members in other places.

Our way of life is at risk. Nuiqsut is the closest community on the North Slope of Alaska to oil and gas development, with industrial activities increasingly encircling our community. There are multiple oil and gas developments just miles from our community, close enough for us to see from Nuiqsut. The rapid pace of development around Nuiqsut and our changing climate are already significantly threatening our lands, waters, animals, and people.

The impacts of climate change are very real for our community, and we are already experiencing changes to the landscape that are further impacting our ability to continue our way of life. Climate change is decreasing water levels in our rivers and streams, and in some years that is making it more difficult to get boats out to the ocean for whaling and to travel in the tributaries

to areas that are important for our traditional way of life. We see changes to our fish that scientists say are related to the temperatures of our waters, but we also worry about the effects from oil and gas development on these sites with reinjection of toxins into the ground, as we have learned from historical activities. That will leave us with tremendous effects in the future with contaminants in the water system.

Our community is currently assessing hydrology in our area to figure out how to ensure we have continued access to our traditional areas because of the rapid and continuous changes to the permafrost and our waters that are impacting our traditional travel routes. Changes to the sea ice pack and the resulting increased exposure to winds and waves create tremendous risks for our whalers. Without the protective ice pack, it is very dangerous to hunt in our small whaling boats. We have more rain and ice fog because of the open ocean. Torrential rains and hydrology changes are causing erosion, including right here in Nuiqsut and along Colville River. We are having so much rain that it is shifting water levels around the community and causing flooding at times. Erosion is affecting and changing access along our transportation routes, including on the Colville River.

We are also experiencing more sink holes and permafrost thaw. We are having to figure out how to repair structures like our homes and other buildings because of melting permafrost. We've seen entire lakes disappear. An area the size of a city block collapsed around four to six feet in an area adjacent to one of ConocoPhillips' roads. Although the road itself has not collapsed, it shows the risk to all this infrastructure — including the oil wells — around our community. As we interact with industry's activities in our traditional areas, we are constantly seeing industry's attempts to do repairs and other fixes to address these problems.

Climate change threatens our ability to hunt, gather, and store our traditional foods. Every single ice cellar we have has been affected by permafrost thaw. We now have three community freezers, but they are not big enough to fit all the whales we can harvest. These are not a solution to the need for ice cellars. We are trying to modify our ice cellars, and the ways in which we use them, to counter the warming. We make them deeper, we pack them with snow, we add covers to create a buffer, and we change when we put food in there and when we take food out. We also have to store more food in freezers and prepare our food differently to counter the lack of reliable ice cellars. All of this takes a lot of extra effort.

We are already experiencing the devastating effects of existing oil development, in addition to the impacts of climate change. These impacts are significant and reach all aspects of our lives. We see them when we go out fishing. My family's fish camp is about a mile away from the existing oil and gas developments at Alpine. The variations in seasonality caused by climate change, combined with effects from oil and gas infrastructure, are changing our lands and waters. For example, industry's water crossings degrade fish habitat and harm seasonal migrations. Gravel mines and manmade lakes affect water levels and alter plant communities. This requires us to pull our fishing nets from the water prematurely. Gravel infrastructure used for oil extraction causes erosion, resulting in more sedimentation. As a result of all these changes, rivers that we have fished for generations are degraded and fishing requires increased effort in order to meet our needs.

We are also seeing changes that harm our ability to hunt caribou and other animals. Our family has a hunting cabin eight miles from Nuiqsut. This cabin is located across the river from where the Alpine oilfield was built. Before the oilfield, this used to be our preferred place to hunt caribou and geese. The caribou are staying away from industrial activity and avoiding the new roads that run near our community to the Colville Delta 5 and Greater Mooses Tooth development projects. There are changes in the way the caribou use the area, and increasing industrial activities are conflicting with traditional and cultural uses, continuing to affect our ability to harvest. The activity levels at those developments are now so high that hunting around there is greatly impacted; there are too many overflights by aircraft and helicopters, airboats, vehicle traffic, and industry personnel present to successfully hunt. The increasing intensity of industrial activities around us is now constantly impacting and shifting our use areas. These changes continue to become more widespread and intense with every passing year, as development expands. There are hunters that use the road to harvest, but that does not replace the value of harvesting that would have been in this area if we did not face these changes.

Instead of addressing these impacts, the Department of Interior (Interior) is proposing to permit another massive new oil development, known as the Willow project. The Willow project would expand the existing development around our community by an additional 250 oil wells, 37 miles of gravel roads, 386 miles of pipelines, multiple airstrips, a massive processing facility, and a roughly 120-acre gravel mine. The project would have devastating and permanent impacts to our community and way of life.

We talked at length with the federal agencies permitting Willow, explaining that activities should not be done in ways that cause impacts to the migration of the animals or the health of the fish that we depend upon. Yet, Willow would involve roads going across nearly every one of our tributaries to the east of our community and bridges and culverts across many streams to the west, and would place oil and gas infrastructure and widespread industrial activity across an area that is important for caribou and our community.

The construction and operation of the Willow project would mean that harmful industrialization would extend out to the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area. Oil and gas activities near that area will have a big impact on the caribou. Caribou currently have to go around Teshekpuk Lake to reach us in the fall time in Nuiqsut. Because of climate change, the lake is no longer frozen in the summer time and the animals cannot traverse through the lake to get to us. As our elders previously recognized, the northeast corner of the lake is a crucial pathway for the caribou. Willow would disrupt their migratory path even more than existing oil and gas projects already have and will further harm our ability to continue our subsistence way of life. Adding the Willow project to the area near Teshekpuk Lake is a huge threat to our ability to survive.

Oil and gas activities, coupled with the changing climate, are causing the caribou to avoid their historic migration areas, forcing us to travel elsewhere to hunt for them. Our sons, nephews, and grandsons can no longer hope to get caribou in our traditional areas. My son has had to travel over 300 miles to get his caribou. Just like with fishing and caribou hunting, we now have to travel elsewhere and increase our efforts to get our birds.

Willow would continue to encircle our community with oil and gas and would make the subsistence and health impacts that we are already experiencing seem minor in comparison to the impacts we will experience in the future. Interior should not approve any permits for Willow unless and until the impacts we are already experiencing from pollution, industrialization, and climate change can be understood and remedied. But instead of taking the time to understand the impacts, the agencies are working to issue permits to the oil and gas industry without fully evaluating the risks to our health, our plants and animals, our air and water, and our future. Impacts to our climate and the health of nearby communities should drive the way agencies make decisions about industrial projects. Tribal communities, especially those most directly impacted, should be meaningfully engaged and have a voice in these decisions.

We have already seen a great reduction in our resources and ability to teach our traditions just from the industrial noise and current development around Nuiqsut. These changes are affecting how we teach our younger generation to hunt in our traditional use areas. Other community members and elders have also noticed this and shared these concerns with me.

The whales are also staying farther offshore because of the noise and activities in their nearshore habitat. We were always taught to be quiet to respect the whales. The noise from the industrial activities agitates the whales and can deflect them from their normal migratory path farther out into the ocean, making it harder for us to hunt. Willow would use barges and offshore equipment to transport infrastructure, and that may risk our subsistence harvesting even further. We cannot afford more nearshore oil and gas activities and or more noise impacts between Nuiqsut and Utqiagvik given our marine mammal harvesting and whaling activities. That is not an acceptable risk for us. Those impacts cost us whales, and cost us feeding our family.

Because of decreased harvests in our traditional areas, we cannot share our foods with our extended families as we used to do and we also have less to consume ourselves. When we cannot practice our traditional ways, our youth cannot learn their heritage. When we do not have our traditional subsistence foods, our people get sick. This raises concerns for our long-term physical, mental, and spiritual health due to the failure to meet our nutritional needs.

Industrial activities forcing people to travel further to hunt and fish creates serious health and safety hazards. The environment is very difficult to travel in and there are risks of injuries that put strains on our limited rescue resources. Climate change has also impacted our roads and trails, weather, and ice, which has contributed to people going missing. People are running out of fuel when they need to travel farther to harvest, they break down further out, they get stuck because erosion or permafrost changes have altered their traditional routes, or the ice is not as thick as it should be. Normal weather patterns are no longer normal and can create conditions where people need to be rescued. In recent years we have had to do many extensive searches for missing people and still have not found some. All of this has put additional strains on our search and rescue and community health resources. We face additional challenges when other people come to our community and it can be difficult to support them with our limited resources. This creates additional pressures for all services, including medivacs and rescue operations. Additional use of areas around our community will only increase these demands.

Our people's health is also harmed by the air pollution resulting from these oil and gas activities, with flaring being a particularly big concern for our air quality. Imagine a massive gas fire burning day and night, emitting toxic smoke and fumes next door to our community. I noticed as a health aide that there were increased numbers of people who needed help to breathe and have suffered from respiratory illnesses with all the development. We have had a tremendous number of people who have needed treatment for respiratory illnesses. We need emissions of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants to decrease to protect our health. We do not need more empty promises that there will be monitoring or measures in the future to address the impacts already occurring now. We need the continuous flaring, which can last for months on end, to stop.

With increased oil and gas activity comes the increased risks of spills, blowouts, and other accidents that present serious risks to our community. Most recently, this March, there was a natural gas leak that lasted for weeks at a drilling pad in the Alpine field. ConocoPhillips evacuated its personnel, but our community was left to figure out for ourselves how to stay safe and to evaluate the risk on our own. As our mayor, I needed to communicate and provide guidance to our community members. But ConocoPhillips and the government agencies tasked with responding to the emergency were not transparent with us about exactly what was going on and did not provide answers to questions. Because they were not transparent and did not address concerns, several families chose to be proactive in opting to leave Nuiqsut during this time to avoid any potential health impacts. ConocoPhillips evacuated about 300 of its own employees even as it publicly denied the leak was a threat to human health and safety in Nuiqsut. This is unacceptable.

We worry and wonder what this gas leak means to the integrity of the drilling pad and the wells on it and across our region. Whether a gas leak will happen again is something that will haunt us into the future. We do not understand the extent of this recent leak and how it may have impacted the health of our community. Even before this gas leak, young community members would ask me about a well blowout that occurred near our community in 2012 that had serious health impacts on community members. We live in fear of a similar blowout in the future. We worry anytime there is an accident like this gas leak, wondering if it will be an event like the Deepwater Horizon explosion or like the well blowout in 2012. Our air quality monitoring will not give us sufficient notification of such an emergency. ConocoPhillips kept telling us during the calls after the gas leak that methane is odorless, but we worry with some of the emissions being odorless that we may not know how we are being harmed and may not wake up one day. The idea that we might wake up one morning to such a disaster weighs heavily on our community. The fear that we might not wake up at all is a fear that we also face. Having oil development in our backyard takes a mental toll on people of all ages, including me.

I am also concerned that there could be an oil spill someday that will devastate the lands, animals, and waters we depend on. In turn, this would diminish our access to traditional foods for years to come. An oil spill could be devastating. For example, around 2014, a barge ran aground near the Colville River and tested our oil spill readiness. The stress and strain on our community showed previous planning efforts were not up to par. Emotional stress and strain from that event is still felt in the community.

Living with these changes our subsistence lifestyle and these uncontrollable risks to our health has effects on other parts of our life, extending well beyond just the impacts from things like respiratory problems. Everything is connected in our culture. As a health aide, I saw first-hand how increased oil activity affected Nuiqsut. My village has some of the highest rates of alcoholism and violence, and our community has seen these social ills increase over time, often associated with oil and gas development. I believe people turned to this because our food sources have become scarce and it has become harder to continue our traditional way of life and culture.

Mental health issues are some of the hardest for our community to deal with because we do not have resources to respond. The mental health issues we deal with are tied to land use conflicts and a loss or change in subsistence resources because of our identity and connection to the land. It is challenging to find solutions to help people deal with mental health conflicts because we do not have resources to look at how these things are connected to development and to help us come up with solutions. Early conflict with development in the Reserve led to an increase in suicide, and additional more recent development has also led to more suicide. Is this the pattern we are going to continue to face in our region? New development, like Willow, will compound these issues for the community.

What are we going to do to protect our people and our health and wellbeing? What will it take to be heard? Is it numbers of suicides? Numbers of substance abuse treatments? Numbers on health disparities? Those are not statistics I want to count, but are they statistics that will make us heard? What will it take to change the permits for activities and projects that harm us and our lands?

I have been talking about these issues for many years, and yet the agencies do not accurately or fully capture Nuiqsut's views in their analysis or acknowledge the very real risks to our community's survival from the continued spread of oil and gas development. We want to be precautionary and preventative. We want to be protective, and we want to be proactive. This means the impacts that we are already experiencing must be studied before the government greenlights even more industrialization on top of our community. It also means that Interior needs to engage and consult with our community in a real way. That has not been happening.

We keep engaging in these permitting processes in the hopes of being heard, even when our experience shows we will not be listened to. Many regulatory processes have occurred over the years, but there is nothing in any permit to respond to our hardships, our loss of harvest, or the loss of our way of life. For the Willow project, the process has been flawed from the outset and continues to get worse. BLM recently held a short comment period on the draft environmental analysis during our busiest time of the year for subsistence harvesting. We asked for more time to submit comments, but the Department of Interior denied that request. We shouldn't have to choose between putting food on our tables versus speaking out on a project that will harm our ability to continue hunting and fishing in our traditional areas. To me, it is obvious that the agencies are going to once again fail to fully consider or address Willow's impacts to our community, and Nuiqsut is going to continue to be sacrificed for the sake of further oil development.

The Reserve is important to me because our families' way of life depends on the health of our animals continuing so that we may continue. Each one of these oil and gas projects puts us at risk, with Willow poised to devastate our community.

Our government seems to spend more time looking for ways to increase oil and gas production than it spends on developing safer and cleaner energy solutions, enforcing these solutions, or protecting the communities most impacted by these projects. Oil and gas development should not happen at the expense of our health and our survival. Our communities are not sacrifice zones.

I fear that our future as Iñupiat is in jeopardy. Congress needs to act. This bill is a step in the right direction for addressing climate change and elevating the voices of communities like ours that are directly impacted by industrial development and the impacts of climate change. I hope this legislation will give a platform to discuss climate and human impacts. I also hope this legislation puts the climate impacts and health impacts of oil and gas development into focus for the Biden administration and Congress.

I ask that you pass this legislation to protect our human rights and our way of life.

Quyanaq for the opportunity to address you today.

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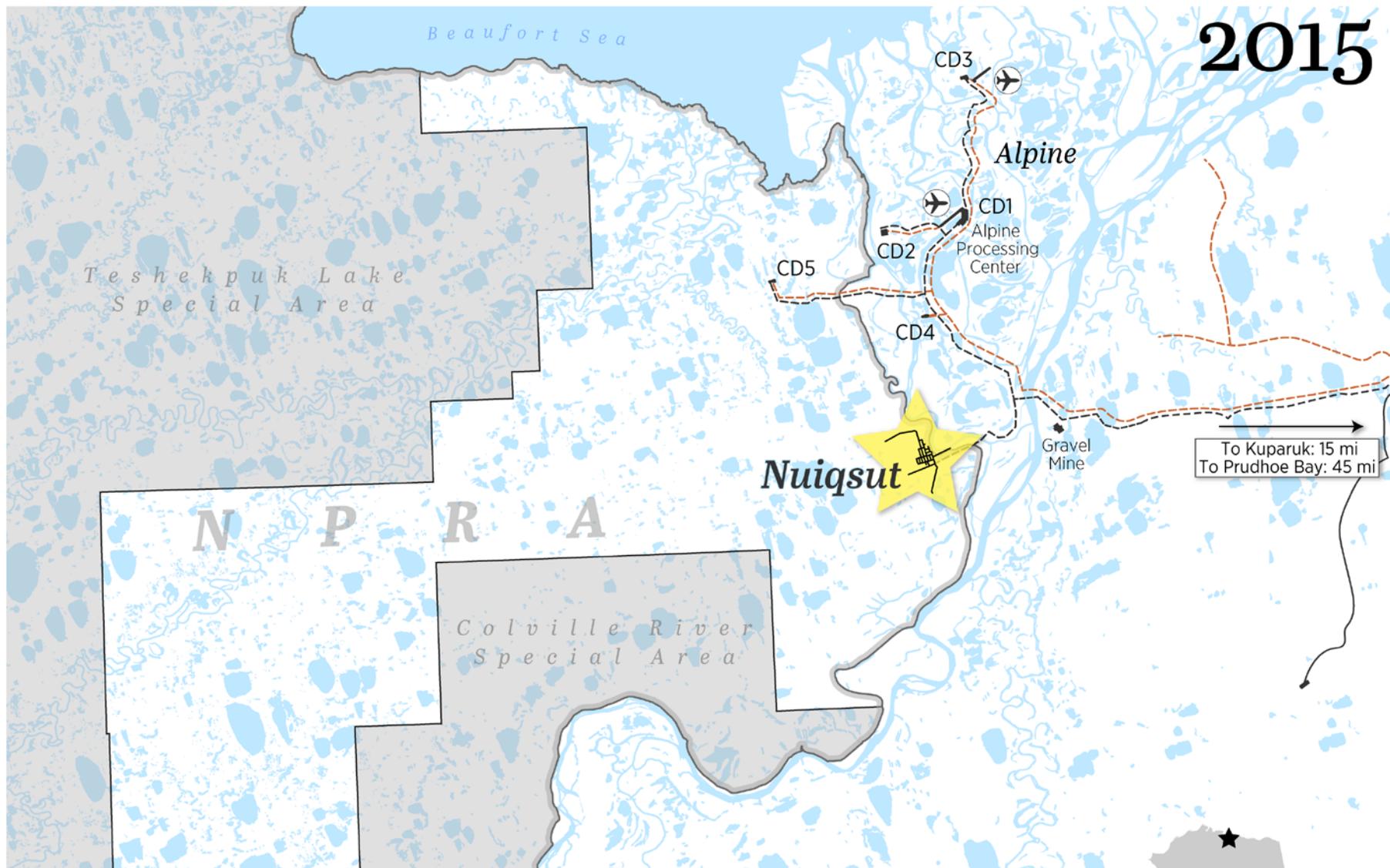
-  National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRA)
-  NPRA Special Areas

Western Arctic Oil and Gas Development

In 1997, the Village of Nuiqsut stood more than 30 miles from the nearest oil fields at Kuparuk, and more than 50 from the development at Prudhoe Bay. Located on the Arctic Coastal Plain at the Colville River, this region teems with birds, fish, and caribou, making subsistence hunting a primary source for the regional economy.



2015



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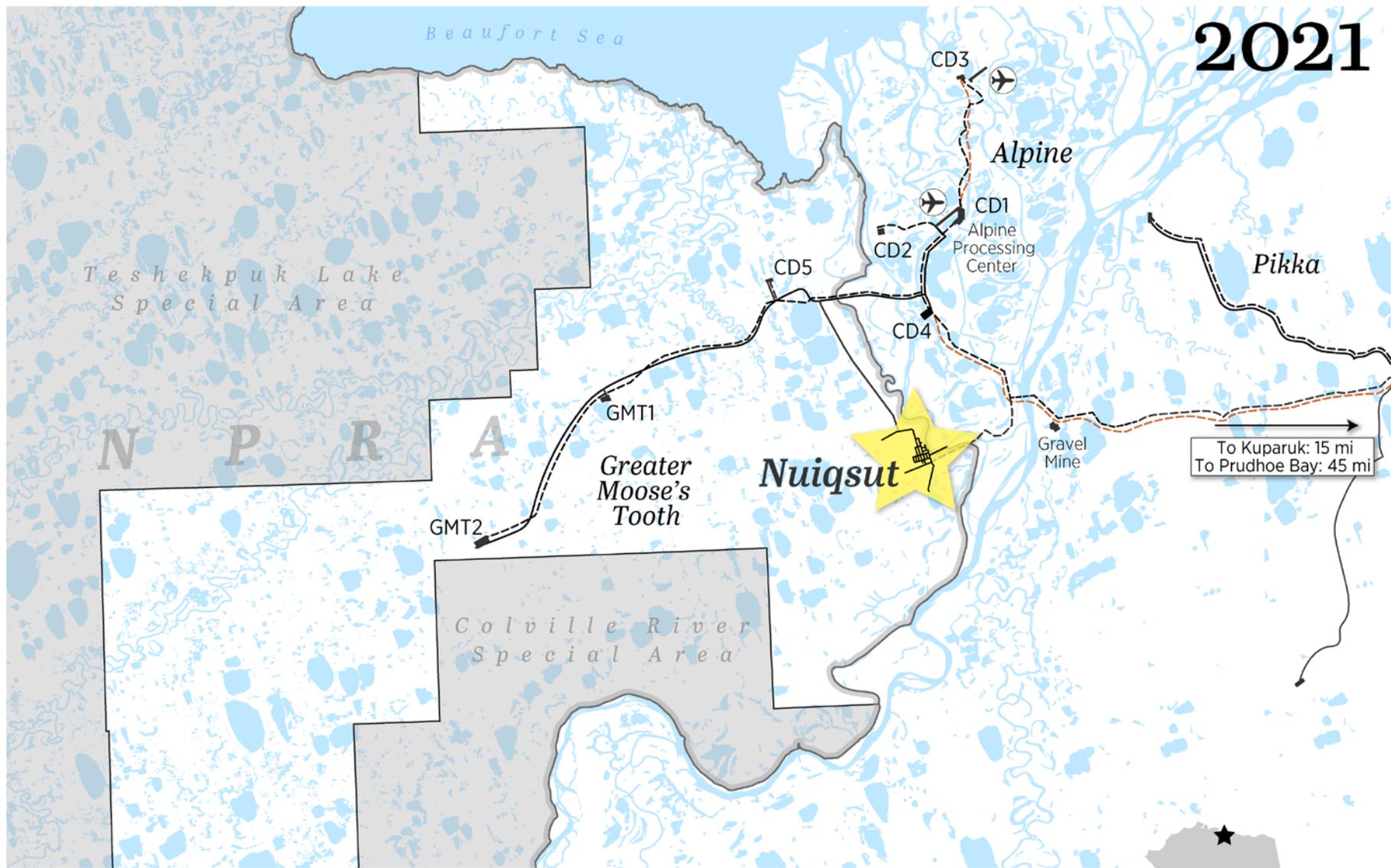


- National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRA)
- NPRA Special Areas
- Gravel road
- Pipeline
- Ice road

Western Arctic Oil and Gas Development

Between 1998 and 2015, ConocoPhillips Alaska developed the Alpine project on the Colville River Delta, just eight miles north of Nuiqsut. A 34-mile pipeline was built to transport Alpine crude to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System via the Kuparuk Pipeline. No gravel roads connect the complex back to the development at Kuparuk and Prudhoe Bay, so each winter, 30-plus miles of ice roads are built to bring equipment and supplies to Alpine.





2021

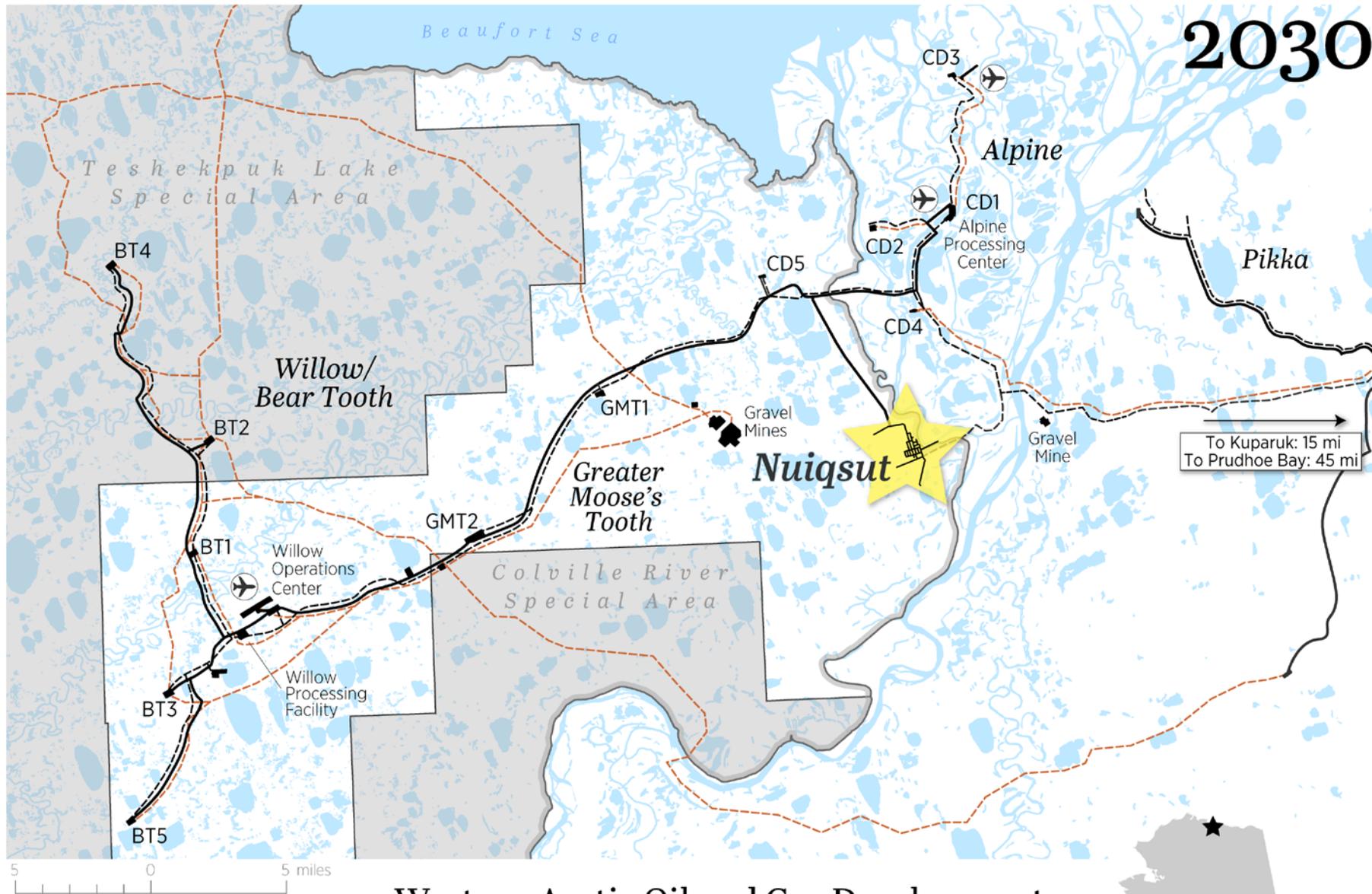
Western Arctic Oil and Gas Development

In 2013, ConocoPhillips Alaska filed permits to develop the Greater Moose's Tooth unit in the National Petroleum Reserve - Alaska (NPRA), ten miles northwest of Nuiqsut. From 2015 to 2021, about eight miles of pipeline and gravel roads were built to connect the two GMT units to CD5, using the existing Alpine infrastructure to transport crude oil back to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) via Kuparuk and Prudhoe Bay. In 2020, Santos began construction of the Pikka project, 10 miles northeast of Nuiqsut.

- N
- National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRA)
- NPRA Special Areas
- Gravel road
- Pipeline
- Ice road



2030



5 0 5 miles



- National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPR)
- NPR Special Areas
- Gravel pad
- Gravel road
- Pipeline
- Ice road

Western Arctic Oil and Gas Development

ConocoPhillips Alaska hopes to start construction of the Willow Project in the Bear Tooth Unit of the National Petroleum Reserve - Alaska as early as 2023. The success of the project relies on the ability to connect Willow's five proposed units back to the Kuparuk Pipeline, and ultimately, TAPS, via the GMT and Alpine infrastructure, as well as an extensive network of ice roads that would completely encircle Nuiqsut.

