

RELIGIOUS WITNESS FOR THE EARTH

News Release

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RELIGIOUS LEADERS GATHER AT DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY TO PRAY FOR ALASKA'S ARCTIC WILDLIFE REFUGE

**Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists Call Global Climate Change a Moral and Spiritual Issue:
In Tradition of Gandhi and King, Some Plan to Engage in Loving Non-Violent Civil Disobedience**

WASHINGTON, DC, May 2, 2001 — Calling the George W. Bush administration's energy policies "an affront to God and a threat to human survival," religious leaders from around the country are converging on Washington tomorrow, May 3, to pray, sing and lobby "to protect God's creation." Perhaps 200 clergy and lay leaders – representing many Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, Moslem, and Native Alaskan Gwich'in communities, among others – will gather at 10:00am at the US Department of Energy (10th St. & Independence Ave., SW) to pray and witness for the Earth.

"As a born-again Christian, President Bush must understand that creation is sacred," said Rev. Fred Small, Co-Chair of Religious Witness for the Earth. "His drill-and-burn energy policy endangers not only the wonders of nature but human existence itself. Despoiling the earth is sacrilege, and exhausting its resources is theft from our own children."

An interfaith environmental network, Religious Witness for the Earth (RWE) has focused initially on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Though the Administration seeks to drill for oil in this pristine wilderness, conservationists note that just a three-mile-per-gallon increase in the efficiency of sport utility vehicles would save more oil each year than the Refuge could produce. RWE's "Call to Religious Witness for the Arctic Refuge" has been signed by over 150 clergy and hundreds more lay-leaders, across many faith traditions.

RWE's niche within the burgeoning religious-environmental movement is to apply the tactics and "moral authority" of the civil rights movement to the environmental crisis.

"Environmental issues are justice issues," maintained Rev. Adora Iris Lee, a United Church of Christ Minister who signed the Call. "The poor and weak are the first victims of environmental assault. Pollution is a sin, and it's time we called it that," she said.

“Religious voices are just beginning to be heard on these crucial issues,” said Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb of Adat Shalom in Bethesda, MD. “The majority of Americans who are affiliated with religious groups are on record opposing environmental degradation and climate change. We are part of a larger movement to lift up the moral and spiritual dimensions of these issues,” Rabbi Dobb said.

In addition to today’s prayer service, Religious Witness for the Earth participants are meeting today with over 100 congressional offices, along with environmental leaders including Bill McKibben, a signatory to the Call and author of *The End of Nature*. In the weeks ahead, Religious Witness for the Earth will continue gathering signatories from all religious communities to its expanded Call to Religious Witness for the Earth. The current version of the Call, which focuses on protecting the people, species, and wildness of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, can be found at www.religiouswitness.org.

About Religious Witness for the Earth

Founded just this year, Religious Witness for the Earth (RWE) is an interfaith network dedicated to bearing public witness to critical environmental issues, concentrating on global climate change. Seeing the environment as an issue of social, ecological, and intergenerational justice, RWE invokes the loving spirit, disciplined courage, and moral authority of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Co-Chairs of RWE are Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, and Reverend Fred Small. For more information, please visit www.religiouswitness.org.

About the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of America’s last unspoiled places. Located on Alaska’s northern rim, it is one of the last true wilderness areas on Earth. Its awe-inspiring landscape, traversed by dozens of rivers and untouched by roads or development, contains forests, glaciated peaks and windswept tundra. The heart of this spectacular wilderness is its coastal plain, a 25-mile band of tundra wetlands that provides the most important birthing and nursing ground for Arctic wildlife. Every year the coastal plain explodes with an extraordinary diversity of life as Arctic animals return in search of food and sanctuary.

The Arctic Refuge, comprising just 5% of the Alaskan Arctic, is the only part closed to development. Still, multinational oil companies – led by BP and ExxonMobil, and their supporters in Congress and the Administration – are promoting legislation that would turn this global treasure into a vast, polluted oil field. Based on experience, drilling for oil there would endanger many of the refuge’s most striking attributes:

- The people of the caribou, **the Gwich’in**, one of the last subsistence cultures in North America who have lived south and east of the refuge for 20,000 years.
- More than 300 **muskox**, a species once nearly extinct, that live year-round on the coastal plain.
- The most important onshore denning area for Beaufort Sea **polar bears**. In fact, the refuge is the largest polar bear denning area in the United States. Polar bears are very sensitive to human activity. If disturbed, females may abandon their dens, leaving cubs to die.
- Millions of **migratory birds**. Some 135 bird species, including Snow geese, sandhill cranes and red-throated loons, nest in the Arctic Refuge coastal plain. They migrate annually from there to most states, South American countries, and the Pacific Rim. For more information, visit www.alaskawild.org.

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