



AIO Opinion Piece
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True democracy isn't easy. It requires lots and lots of work to ensure that every voice is heard. Through numerous elections, debates and even compromises, we strive for an outcome that best represents the interests of everyone – even if the process isn't the most efficient. It's messy but undoubtedly necessary.

Recent unilateral moves by the Obama administration illustrate that it prefers to avoid the messiness of constituent engagements, of leaving some voices out of the conversation. After all, it's easier for politicians to stay in Washington and talk and act amongst themselves.

The administration's decision to manage the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as Wilderness, with a capital "W", caught many Alaskans flat-footed. As North Slope Borough Mayor Charlotte Brower reacted, "These types of paternalistic, executive fiats seem to be more appropriate for Andrew Jackson's administration than Barack Obama's," further noting that the administration ought to first travel to Alaska and speak with the people who live there before making sweeping decisions.

This wasn't an anomaly but clearly a pattern of how the administration prefers to treat Alaska. Just prior to his announcement on ANWR, the president issued an executive order to enhance coordination in the Arctic in advance of the United States' forthcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council. While I can appreciate a renewed focus on the Arctic and its issues, the White House's approach to the region is too narrow and single-minded. For example, the order forms an executive committee that does not include one single Alaska Native or Alaska official.

Through our experience with Arctic Iñupiat Offshore, LLC (AIO) and the many dialogues with Shell Oil prior to the company's formation, I've seen first-hand the value of a policy that includes open dialogue between parties. AIO is a privately held corporation comprised of Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, Tikigaq Corporation, Olgoonik Corporation, Atqasuk Corporation, Ukpeaġvik Iñupiat Corporation, Nunamiut Corporation and Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation - established to promote sustainable economic development within the Arctic Slope region. AIO's investment in Shell and its offshore drilling programs ensures that Alaska Natives have a say in decisions and an opportunity to voice concerns. I would like to see the administration adopt a similarly open approach when it comes to critical Arctic issues.



The Obama administration will soon make many critical decisions regarding the future of Shell's program and Arctic drilling in general. I strongly hope that federal regulators will value the improvements that Shell has made to its program over the past few years and allow the company to proceed with operations this summer. I further hope that the president and his Interior Secretary Jewell will weigh the desires and concerns of Alaska Natives properly, recognizing that we are the people most directly and significantly affected by decisions made thousands of miles away. It is the right approach, especially as the U.S. prepares to take a global leadership role in chairing the Arctic Council.

While the AIO model may not be the appropriate tool for encouraging better communication between federal officials and Alaskans, it does demonstrate that its mission – better dialogue and shared responsibility – is achievable, sustainable and mutually beneficial. As history has shown, the livelihood of the Iñupiat and our way of life can unfortunately be impacted by uninformed, yet seemingly well-intended policy makers. That's why I'm adding my voice to the chorus of others in my region in pushing for a seat at the table when critical decisions are made regarding the Arctic. It's not too late – if the administration wants to listen.

Rex A. Rock Sr. is the president of Arctic Iñupiat Offshore, LLC. He is also the president and CEO of Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC), the largest locally-owned and operated company in Alaska.