

# Inslee Should Mind His Own State

By Mayor Charlotte Brower, North Slope Borough

IT WAS DISAPPOINTING TO SEE A recent letter from Washington State Governor Jay Inslee to Secretary Jewel protesting the federal government's decision to open portions of the Arctic to oil and gas development and calling for a ban on further lease sales.

Governor Inslee's comments reflect a lack of basic knowledge about our region and are offensive to people that live in America's Arctic. We also did not miss the fact that his letter made no reference to the people that actually live there.

The municipality that I represent, the North Slope Borough, spans an area of more than 94,000 square miles across Alaska's Arctic Slope – that is 23,000 square miles larger than the entire state of Washington. It is not an area, however, that is untouched as Governor Inslee's letter asserts. The majority of our nearly 8,000 full-time residents are Inupiat Eskimos who continue to be stewards of the land and sea, much as their ancestors have for millennia. And the Inupiat will continue to be part of the Arctic landscape today as they always have been.

Inslee's concerns for the environment and the natural resources of the Arctic, while laudable, fail to acknowledge the reality of the world we live in today. Last year alone, more than 800,000 tons of petroleum products made their way through the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Strait, on tankers transiting the Northern Sea Route, en route to Asia. As Russia ramps up oil and gas development throughout its Arctic regions (including in areas immediately adjacent to US waters), it is very likely that this traffic will increase. Thus, the

Arctic is already at risk from an oil spill.

And by not investing in long-term infrastructure for Arctic production, as Inslee's comments espouse, our homelands will be more at risk from oil spills. Any potential oil and gas development in the US Arctic will entail extensive investment in oil spill cleanup and response personnel and equipment. This includes other elements of essential infrastructure such as ports and telecommunications. Development will also likely spur the federal government to invest in more icebreakers and to establish a permanent Coast Guard presence in Arctic waters.

These kinds of investments will only make the Arctic environment more secure, not less. But as things stand today, we are only one shipping accident away from environmental catastrophe.

Governor Inslee's concern over carbon pollution is also misguided. Instead of focusing on the root cause of carbon emissions, which is the consumption of fossil fuels, he posits the simplistic, more parochial solution of halting US oil and gas development in the Arctic. While this may make for lively banter during wine and cheese socials in Olympia, it reeks of the paternalistic past when the State of Alaska was plundered by people from Washington and elsewhere who coveted our resources. But instead of whales, fish, or timber as it was in those days, it's wilderness areas and romantic notions of what the Arctic should be that continue to drive outsiders like Jay Inslee to glibly advocate for limiting resource development.

It should be noted that the State of Washington emits more than twice the amount of carbon dioxide as Alaska.

Perhaps we should call on the Environmental Protection Agency to refuse permits to large factories that build airplanes or other products in Washington State so that your levels of carbon pollution are diminished. Of course, we wouldn't do that out of respect for the people of Washington State whose livelihoods depend on those vital industries.

If Washington's Governor is serious about limiting the entrenchment of fossil fuel use in our society, perhaps he should start first with making more responsible personal choices rather than attacking another state and region's largest economic generator. Limiting resource development in the US will only benefit foreign nations who have much less respect for the natural environment and who will gladly take our country's place to fill the demand.

But if Governor Inslee would like to understand the benefits that responsible resource development can bring to a region, we invite him to come and visit the North Slope. Here he can learn from those of us who can still remember the old times when some parents had to watch their children die in their arms because there was no clinic or medical staff to treat them, or when hunters would go out on the ice never be heard from again due to lack of communications and search and rescue capability. He could listen to stories about children who had to leave their communities to go to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools where they were abused and forbidden to speak our native language or about people getting sick and dying due to unsanitary water and sewer systems.

Thanks to the vision of our elders who recognized the benefits that resource development could bring to our people and region, we Inupiat do not have to endure these types of conditions any longer.

So in the future, we hope Governor Inslee will take the time to more carefully consider the policies for which he advocates. Then perhaps he might bring about more good than harm. **PMM**



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