

Testimony of Mike Williams on “Impacts of Environmental Changes on Treaty Rights, Traditional Lifestyles, and Tribal Homelands” to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, July 19, 2012.

My name is Mike Williams. I am a Yupiaq from a small village of Akiak, Alaska, located in western Alaska on the Kuskokwim River. Currently, I am the Chief of the Yupiit Nation, a consortium of Federally Recognized Tribes and Secretary/Treasurer of the Akiak Native Community, a Federally Recognized Tribe. I also serve on the National Tribal Environmental Council.

Climate change is having substantial and adverse impacts on our Alaska Indigenous Peoples. Our temperatures are increasing, our ice is melting, our animals are becoming diseased and dislocated, our oceans are acidifying, our sea levels are rising, and our villages are sinking. These impacts are affecting our daily existences and every other facet of life, such as traditional and customary hunting and fishing, and gathering practices, travel, and consequently a viable future for our homelands. Our elders, in particular, are deeply concerned about what they are witnessing. In Alaska, unpredictable weather and ice conditions make travel and time-honored subsistence practices hazardous, endangering our lives.

### COASTAL IMPACTS

Sea level rise, greater storms, storm surges, flooding, and erosion – all tied to climate change – are endangering my People, the Yupiaq/Cupiaqs. Alaska’s Indigenous villages are literally being swept away into the sea because of coastal erosion. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, at least three tribes – Shishmaref, Kivalina, and Newtok – must relocate, while over 180 other communities are also at risk.

Two reports prepared for congressional requesters by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), indicate that 86 percent of Alaska Indigenous villages are threatened by erosion and flooding due to warming temperatures. Yet, Alaska’s Indigenous villages cannot access some federal program assistance due to prohibitive funding criteria. There are no overarching federal plans or lead agency to address the fact that many of the residents of these villages are becoming climate change refugees.

Everything is changing so quickly. Lakes are drying; new insects are appearing; permafrost is melting; berries are disappearing; storms are fiercer; animal populations are changing; our fish are spoiling on drying racks; and polar bears are drowning. Our ice is so much thinner or entirely gone. And our coastlines are eroding, washing away ancient artifacts, gravesites, as well as modern infrastructure.

### INLAND IMPACTS

In the summer of 2009, the interior of Alaska had the driest July in 104 years. 2.9 million acres of forest burned and the salmon runs are the weakest in recent memory. Just this summer, some started to fish even during the closed subsistence fishing due to the need for survival. A warming climate contributes to increase forest fires and devastating millions of acres of forests. Many lakes and ponds on the tundra are rapidly drying up as a result of warmer temperatures. Melting of permafrost compounds climate change by further releasing additional CO2 and methane into the air. The loss of permafrost also reduces habitat and increases energetic demands on migrating wildlife. Warming events have altered the route and time of migration for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, thereby impacting the subsistence lifestyle of such peoples as the Gwich’in Athabascan. The forage habitat of caribou is shrinking with increased forest fires and shifting tundra. The increased frequency of freezing rain due to rising temperatures has resulted in a crust covering lichen, which has diminished the caribou’s ability to forage for their primary food source.

### LARGER PATTERNS

Throughout the nation in Indian Country, traditional foods are declining, local landscapes are changing, rural infrastructure is being challenged, soils are drying, and lake and river levels are declining. Tribes are experiencing droughts, loss of forests, fishery problems, and increased health risks from heat strokes and from diseases that thrive in warmer temperatures. If climate change is not addressed, the impacts on Alaska Indigenous Peoples and American Indians will be immense. Models and the best scientific data and

traditional knowledge indicate that if we do not reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the entire Arctic ice cap will melt, endangering the culture and subsistence needs of the Indigenous Peoples of the North. Furthermore, flooding, sea level rise, storm surges, and greater storms will endanger my people, the Yupiaqs, as well as tribes in Florida and elsewhere. Hotter temperatures threaten American Indians, but especially in the southwest and Florida, where we often do not have adequate means of escaping the heat. Increased global warming will also endanger salmon in the Pacific Northwest, which are crucial to tribes there, as well as Alaska. Finally, on almost all tribal lands, enhanced global warming will threaten our sacred waters, essential to our physical and cultural survival. Clearly, climate change presents one of the greatest threats to our future, and must be addressed by Congress as soon as possible.

## LOW CARBON OPPORTUNITIES AND INITIATIVES

There are many economic opportunities for Alaska's Indigenous Peoples and American Indians in a low-carbon future, especially renewable energy. Tribes offer some of the greatest resources for helping the nation with renewable energy development, particularly wind, solar power, biomass, and geothermal power.

In Alaska, for example, we are installing wind power in very remote communities that has also been installed on Indian reservations. Some of the small villages are assessing biomass facilities using forestry waste. Some are analyzing geothermal power plants. They are installing systems in the southwest for solar power.

To achieve Indian Country's and Alaska's renewable energy potential, however, we need investment capital, infrastructure, and technical capacity. Any renewable energy program must include opportunities and incentive for tribes. Also, with training, American Indian and Alaska Indigenous youth and adults can be actively engaged in renewable energy jobs, from engineering, to manufacturing, to installation. There are also economic opportunities associated with energy conservation. We would welcome tribal based initiatives to better insulate our homes, to convert our lighting, and to educate our members regarding energy efficiency practices. We want jobs that save us money and reduce our carbon footprint. In general, we believe that a low-carbon economy will provide multiple local benefits by decreasing air pollution, creating jobs, reducing energy use, and saving money.

## ACTIONS NEEDED

In recognition of tremendously serious impacts that global warming poses to American Indians, Alaska Indigenous Peoples, our most important organizations have passed resolutions outlining problems, threats, and needed actions by Congress. These organizations and tribal governments are Akiak Native Community, Alaska Federation of Natives, Rural Community Action Program, the National Congress of American Indians, and various non-profits and native corporations.

With respect to adaptation, communities like Newtok, Alaska are already taking action to move from dangerous sites to higher ground. It is important for Congress to recognize that the adaptation needs are very great. We require planning assistance, federal coordination, and significant financial resources to execute these crucial relocations and to fund other adaptation needs. In all instances, it is important that our traditional knowledge be incorporated and respected, that we be consulted, and that our values and needs be honored. Alaska's Indigenous villages and Indian Tribes as a whole have borne the disproportionate and negative impacts of climate change. I implore you to consider the circumstances unique to our villages by mandating climate change legislation that federal agencies develop, fund, and implement a strategic plan that addresses the climate change impacts on our villages and tribal communities.

The plan could need to be developed in consultation with Alaska's Federally Recognized Tribes with our free, prior, and informed consent and include the prioritization and coordination of assistance to our villages; the permanent relocation of qualified Alaska Indigenous villages in a manner that obtains our free, prior, and informed consent in the planning and implementation of such relocations (and removal of

barriers for accessing federal funds for such efforts), and also include the mitigation of climate change impacts upon the traditional and subsistence practices of Alaska Indigenous Peoples.

In addition, Alaska Indigenous villages should be provided with adequate apportionment of the allowances made available for domestic adaptation purposes, if any.

## CONCLUSION

Alaska's 231 Federally Recognized Tribes are being seriously threatened by climate change and its impacts. It is therefore imperative that Congress take action to protect the nation's many tribal communities against such impacts and help protect and preserve our lands, cultures, and our existence for the current generations and those to come. Many non-renewable resources development projects will also impact our languages, cultures, health impacts, housing, and our ancestral lands, waters, and air. We must be at the table to have meaningful input before development occurs.

In conclusion, I'd like to share my own personal experience with climate change and its impact on one of my great loves. We have used dogs for transportation for thousands of years. Since 1992, I have had the good fortune of participating in the Iditarod, widely referred to as the "Last Great Race on Earth." As a participant, I have seen the race change in number of ways, most notably the lack of snow cover in recent years. On one occasion, the race was moved to Fairbanks. It has been permanently moved to Willow from the more southerly Wasilla. Since the days are now too warm, we have to run mostly at night now to keep dogs cool.

There is much at stake. I implore you to take meaningful action to address climate change and resource development now and to help assure that the traditions of Alaska Indigenous Peoples and American Indian Tribes, which have withstood the test of time, continue for generations into the future.

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