

**TESTIMONY OF BEN MALLOTT, PRESIDENT
ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES
prepared for the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
regarding the
Oversight Hearing “Impacts of Government Shutdowns and Agency Reductions in
Force on Native Communities”**

October 29, 2025

I. Introduction

Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today regarding the impacts of the ongoing federal government shutdown and agency reductions in force on our Alaska Native communities. I would like to offer a special thank you to Senator Murkowski for her leadership in advocating for Alaska and for the Alaska Native people.

My name is Ben Mallott, and I serve as the President of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Alaska Native organization. Our membership includes over 140,000 Alaska Natives and their institutions set up to serve our people. AFN’s membership includes federally recognized tribes, regional tribal consortiums, regional non-profit organizations, and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) village and regional corporations.

Many of our tribal organizations have worked hard to position themselves to weather the impacts of a shutdown. Alaska Native entities receiving federal assistance engage in best practices to prepare for and utilize all available funding prior to a lapse in federal appropriations to keep our programs stable and our operations uninterrupted to the greatest extent possible during a shutdown. But when a shutdown drags on for a prolonged period, there is little we can do to keep the impacts to our organizations and communities at bay. Tomorrow we will hit the critical 30-day mark of the shutdown, and our organizations will be facing difficult realities and decisions about the ability to carry out certain programs and whether tribal staff must be laid off. A prolonged shutdown places many Alaska Native entities and communities in a difficult and potentially life-threatening position. So please keep in mind that the impacts I raise today will continue to grow until the shutdown ends.

II. Impacts of the Federal Government Shutdown and RIFs

a. Disaster Recovery for Western Alaska

I would be remiss if I did not start my remarks by acknowledging that our communities in Western Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta are still reeling from the devastating impacts of Typhoon Halong, which struck our state on October 12. Disaster recovery in this region is unlike other regions in our country. These communities are remote with no access to roads and are hundreds of miles from cities to where these residents must evacuate. Both short and long-term recovery efforts are complex, and reliable communication with federal agencies assisting in disaster recovery like FEMA is essential. While the federal government is working on immediate response to Typhoon Halong, the shutdown creates further complications and uncertainties for our communities in the region devastated by the Typhoon. Many of the people forced to evacuate the region now face a lengthy recovery process that will require substantial engagement with the federal government. Any delay or confusion caused by the shutdown adds a tremendous burden to our already hurting people in the region. Relief efforts are being supported by federal employees working without pay. We appreciate these workers' vital contributions, and we want to see them be paid for their work, including back pay for their unpaid work these past few weeks.

Threats to Food and Heat Availability and Assistance

We are deeply concerned about the impacts of the shutdown and its implications for food availability and assistance in Alaska. From the Federal Subsistence Board to SNAP benefits, the shutdown is threatening the availability of food in our Alaska Native communities. This is compounded by the fact that winter is upon us in Alaska. As temperatures approach 0 degrees up north, a gallon of milk is \$13. Our people are about to be in the very real situation of having to pick between food and heat.

Our people rely heavily on subsistence to feed our families and to fill freezers to get through the long, dark winters. Subsistence activities on federal lands are managed through the Interior Department's Federal Subsistence Board, which has canceled its Regional Advisory Committee meetings across the state in October. These meetings are critically important for governance of the subsistence system our rural Alaska Native communities depend on to survive.

SNAP benefits expire on Friday, and it will have a devastating impact in Alaska. SNAP serves approximately 66,000 Alaskans, including thousands of Alaska Native peoples who live in remote or economically disadvantaged regions. The State of Alaska has confirmed that due to the federal shutdown, November benefits will not be issued to SNAP recipients, removing a critical food security lifeline for families and individuals. The loss of SNAP benefits will deepen food insecurity and threaten the well-being of Alaska Native elders, children, and families. Further, the lack of SNAP benefits will overwhelm informal

food assistance programs or organizations, such as food banks, in communities where they exist, to say nothing of the impacts for communities where they do not exist.

The shutdown will also pose a threat to vulnerable households across the state that rely on federal assistance for heating their homes, such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). New funding for the LIHEAP program will be unavailable during the shutdown, undermining a critical support system for Alaska Native families and elders during harsh winter conditions. At least one Alaska Native housing authority had to tell their community members that while they will take new LIHEAP applications during the shutdown, payments are on hold until the shutdown ends.

A continued shutdown will force too many Alaska Native families, elders, and people to choose between basic human needs such as food or home heating during the winter months.

b. Lack of Consultation

Lack of federal employees carrying out federal agency actions and responsibilities compromises the government's legal requirements to engage in meaningful consultation with Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations. Internal agency training and education is an essential part of building the right agency talent and capacity to engage in meaningful consultation, especially in Alaska, where additional training is required to educate agency professionals about the unique status of Native land and the unique and diverse systems of Native governance in Alaska. It often takes years for the right relationships to be built. Simply put, reductions in workforce at both the regional and headquarters levels compromise the ability of federal agencies to meet their consultation obligations.

And during a shutdown—especially one as long as the current lapse in appropriations—there is essentially no path for our communities to engage in real discussions with agency personnel making key decisions affecting our livelihoods. For example, as mentioned above, the Federal Subsistence Board is canceling or delaying its Regional Advisory Committee meetings across the state in October, which are critically important for governance of the subsistence system our rural Alaska Native communities depend on to survive.

c. Impacts to Health Care

While other witnesses today will speak more on the impacts of the shutdown on Tribal health, I want to share with you concerns raised by Alaska Native health care providers.

We deeply appreciate Congress providing the Indian Health Service (IHS) advance appropriations. This has been very helpful to insulate IHS programs from the government shutdown. However, there are a number of Tribal health programs and services that are not included in the advance appropriations that are being affected. While Tribes have been paid health services and other related funding, they have not been paid contract support costs, 105(l) lease payments, or certain other facility services that are needed to support health operations. Contract support costs help fund the administrative and overhead costs associated with carrying out health services. The 105(l) lease payments help to fund maintenance and improvement activities for health facilities. These types of payments are not being processed during the shutdown under a lapse in appropriations.

The shutdown also impacts other aspects of Tribal health. For example, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Tribal Technical Advisory Group (CMS TTAG) may have to cancel its upcoming meeting if the shutdown is still in effect. The TTAG is an important advisory body to the CMS Administrator providing expertise on CMS policies, guidelines, and programmatic issues affecting IHS and Tribal health programs. Medicaid is one of these extremely important programs, which provides from 40-60 percent of funding for IHS and Tribal programs. This upcoming meeting is very important for the TTAG since they are working with CMS to develop operational guidance and recommendations to implement several Tribal provisions included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

III. Conclusion

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have about our Alaska Native communities and the shutdown impacts discussed here today.