ORAL TESTIMONY OF MARY DAVID, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
KAWERAK, INC.
"When Catastrophe Strikes: Responses to Natural Disasters in Indian Country"

Chairman Tester and esteemed members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Mary David, and I'm the Executive Vice President of Kawerak, Inc. I am a tribal member of Nome Eskimo Community and I was born, raised and live in Nome, which is located in northwestern Alaska.

Kawerak is the tribal consortium in the Bering Strait region of Alaska, an area with 20 federally recognized tribes and 16 communities. Our service area is approximately 26,000 square miles or roughly the size of West Virginia. The region's population is about 9,000 people, of which roughly 75% are of Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik and Yupik decent.

All of the communities in the Bering Strait Region are located on the sea coast or shores of rivers. We are the first people to know when change is happening in our environment. The Bering Strait region people have been hunting and gathering from the land and sea since time immemorial. The impacts of global climate change, severe arctic storms and arctic shipping on marine life is of high concern due to our reliance on these food sources. Kawerak has played a key role in compiling Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Through our Social Science program, hundreds of hunters and gatherers, who have lived their whole lives in this environment, provided data on the many changes they have observed.

Last November 2013, the President declared a disaster in Alaska for areas affected by severe storms, straight-line winds, and flooding. Several communities in the Bering Strait region were impacted by these storms. Several of our communities are experiencing rapid erosion of their shorelines, and may be better off being relocated. With rising temperatures, it has led to the thawing of the permafrost which holds our land together. When storms occur it erodes the shoreline and riverbanks much more easily due to its weakened state.

Erosion can be gradual or extreme with each fall/winter storm event. With the storms happening more often and more severely, coastal erosion seems to be happening quicker. Shaktoolik, Shishmaref and Unalakleet, were identified by the Immediate Action Work Group as three of six communities identified as imminently threatened. The 2009 Government Accountability Office Report on villages threatened by flooding and erosion, identified Golovin, St. Michael, and Teller were imminently threatened by flooding and erosion, in addition to Shaktoolik, Shishmaref and Unalakleet. These threats to life and property still exist today, and are getting worse. Stebbins, Alaska is not one of the villages listed, but due to last November's fall storm it was hit by high surge waves that overflowed and flooded the community.

FEMA needs to speed up the response and recovery process, and should go out to the communities as soon as possible after a known disaster, to see its impacts before the clean-up has begun. Also, it is hard for individuals and families to access assistance because of not knowing what is available; making a presence soon after a storm would help those in need. Access to emergency funds are needed immediately to address life and safety issues such as obtaining

heating fuel, safe drinking water, food, clothing, shelter and communication. Other response agencies, such as the Alaska Red Cross, local regional health and tribal organizations and other volunteers responded much faster to Stebbins than the federal and state government agencies did.

There is a lack of understanding by federal agencies and personnel regarding the unique living situation of remote Alaska and the challenges rural residents experience on a daily basis. In remote Alaska there are no highways, no docks or ports, and no railways connecting most communities with other hub communities or the lower 48. The only access is via barge from June 1st through September 30th and only by air service when the weather is navigable. Home owners do not have a Home Depot to go to and if substantial damage is done, they often are not repaired for months, sometimes years.

In Stebbins, four (4) houses were damaged and several homes had water damage inside the home. The outside of these homes look good, but the inside water damage is difficult to clean and it is taking many months to make them livable again. When disasters occur, the time it takes to get back to normalcy may take from six months to a year and often times longer due to the challenges that exist and the wait time for supplies to arrive and repair to occur during our short construction season.

Evacuation shelters, supplied with necessities, and alternative evacuation routes are needed in the more vulnerable communities. Preventative measures to slow the effects of erosion and flooding are needed while communities plan for long term solutions. For those communities who may be better off relocating, they are placed in a Catch-22 situation. Efforts to prevent and protect the existing village, only prolongs the relocation efforts by thus reducing the urgency to move.

Although tribes can declare a disaster directly to FEMA the non-federal cost share is an issue. The Bering Strait region tribes do not have available savings or do not have industry services such as gaming or mineral resources to generate revenue to meet the required financial cost-share-match. When the State of Alaska declares a disaster and FEMA funds relief efforts, 75% is covered by the federal government and 25% by the State. So from Kawerak's viewpoint, it's actually a detriment to the tribe if they by-pass the state and declare a disaster directly to FEMA.

Our federal, state, local and tribal governments are ill-prepared for both the natural disasters that we have already experienced and the potential future natural and man-made disasters in our region. Not only is there a lack of a lead agency spearheading comprehensive efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters, there is a lack of coordination among the agencies that are tasked with carrying out the splintered components of these efforts.

In conclusion, The Stafford Act is a response when a disaster happens, which is important. But due to changing climate conditions, changing sea ice conditions and melting permafrost and the extreme variations in the weather, our communities are in imminent danger and preventative measures are needed. No person, in the most developed country in the world, should be subject to the threat of loss of life due to conditions that can be mitigated by governmental actions.

The United States provides humanitarian efforts to other countries; often times spending millions of dollars in aid. Our local populations may be small; but we are impacted just the same when

disasters occur. We still deserve support and relief, similar to when disaster assistance and support is mobilized to other countries around the world or to lower 48 coastal communities.

The U.S. is an arctic nation and has an obligation to assert its sovereign authority and protect national interests. With the authority comes responsibility for disaster prevention, mitigation, and response, especially in an area such as the Bering Strait Region, which is extremely remote and exposed to international ocean traffic.

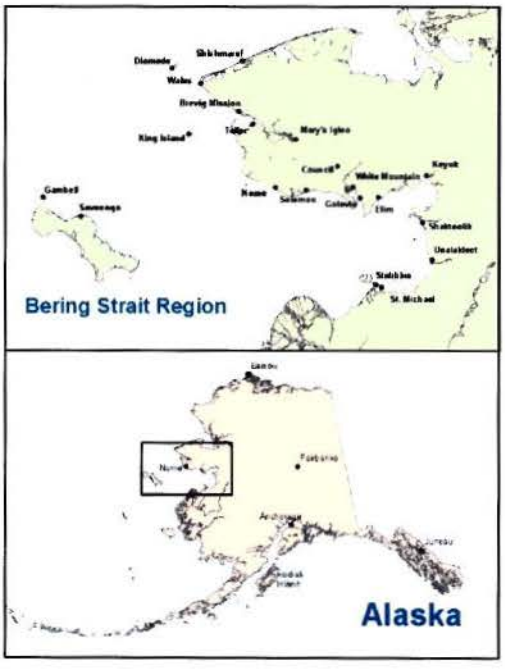
Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

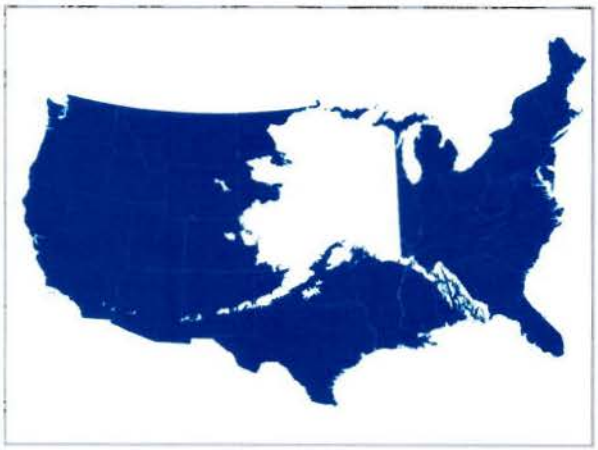
WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MARY DAVID, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
KAWERAK, INC.
"When Catastrophe Strikes: Responses to Natural Disasters in Indian Country"

Chairman Tester, and esteemed members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit written testimony on the issue of responding to natural disasters in Indian country. My name is Mary David, and I'm the Executive Vice President of Kawerak, Inc. I was born, raised and live in Nome, Alaska. I am a tribal member of Nome Eskimo Community, I have a bachelors degree in Social Work from the University of Alaska, Anchorage and a Master of Public Administration from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Our environment is changing at an unprecedented rate. When the severe fall storms hit our region last November, 2013, several of our communities were impacted which brought to our attention areas that need improvement. Besides natural disasters, we are also threatened by potential manmade disasters due to increased ship traffic through the Bering Strait.

Kawerak is the tribal consortium in the Bering Strait region of Alaska, an area with 20 federally recognized tribes and 16 communities. The region is not connected to the rest of Alaska by roads, and 14 of the 15 communities are not accessible by road to the hub community of Nome. Primary access year round is by air service, with small commuter planes and gravel runways in most of the villages. The ocean freezes over the winter and barge services ends; air transportation for freight is thus higher in the winter as it must be flown in. All of the communities in the Bering Strait Region are located on the sea coast or shores of rivers. Our service area is approximately 26,000 square miles or roughly the size of West Virginia. The region's population is about 9,000 people, of which roughly 75% are Alaska Native (Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik and Yupik decent).





We are the first people to know when change is happening in our environment. The Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik and Yupik people have been in the Bering Strait region hunting and gathering from the land and sea since time immemorial. The marine life (pacific walrus, bow head whales, beluga whales, ice seals, polar bears, fish, ocean plants, sea urchins and sea birds) are vital and important sources of food. The impacts of global climate change, severe arctic storms and arctic shipping on marine life is of high concern due to our reliance on these food sources.

We notice a change in our environment. Our hunters are having to go further out to find walrus or oogruk (bearded seals). This may be due to a number of factors: noise, change in current pattern, weather, and ice conditions. Ice is a vital element to our survival and its condition has changed. Local experts have noticed that the ice is less stable, thinner, softer and melts more quickly in the spring. Our sea level is also rising. Places where people use to gather fish among the rocks are now inaccessible and where seals once hauled out on Savoonga, Alaska it is now underwater and unused. We have also noticed different species of animals in our region. The Steller sea lion, once seen during the summer months has recently been documented in the Bering Strait region into December and humpback whales now are seen with seasonal regularity north of Bering Strait and have even recently been documented in the north eastern Chukchi Sea. Additionally, different plant and animal life are being seen in locations where they have never been seen before. The Hanasaki king crab, *Parlithodes brevipes*, arrived to US waters for the first time when it was pulled from a subsistence crab hole through the sea ice at Little Diomede during the spring 2003. Since that time, the Hanasaki crab is a common species harvested near Saint Lawrence Island. Several egg-bearing females were harvested and suggest that this unusual visitor is now a new part of the Bering Strait ecosystem.

Changes to our environment can be characterized by an increase in surface temperatures, changes to precipitation rates, erosion rates, decrease in sea ice coverage all stemming from climate change. (Progress Report, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, 2014) Severe "super" storms seem to occur more frequently and more severely. Hurricane force winds can hit our communities and can knock out power lines, cause storm surges, create tidal flooding, and impact service delivery and flights.

The photo is the roof of my neighbor's house due to wind damage sustained last November 2013. The photo shows the force of the wind during this super storm.

Last November 2013, the President declared a disaster in Alaska for areas affected by severe storms, straight-line winds, and flooding. There were several communities in the Bering Strait region that were impacted by a series of storms that affected western Alaska. The storm damage resulted from coastal flooding due to the storm surge and strong winds.

Kawerak has a Natural Resources division, which plays a key role in compiling Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Through our Social Science program, hundreds of hunters and gatherers (who have lived their whole lives observing the environment) provided data on the many changes they have witnessed, such as a rise in sea level, later freeze up and thinner ice, permafrost melting, changes in weather patterns, and shorter winters, more rain, and hotter summers. Absent the physical protections of landfast ice (which act as a seawall), there is more damage from severe fall and early winter storms. Several of our communities are experiencing rapid erosion of their shorelines, and may be better off being relocated.

The impacts from the storm may also be due in part from the lack of permafrost (permanently frozen subsoil), that holds our land together. With rising temperatures it has led to the thawing of the permafrost. When storms occur it erodes the shoreline and riverbanks much more easily due to its weakened state. The following are recent photos from the community of Teller, Alaska depicting erosion damage near their cemetery. As reported in a conversation with Tim Wolforth, with the Alaska Army National Guard, on a recent trip to Teller, local resident Joe Garnie informed him the edge near the cemetery has eroded about 20 feet recently. The next "big" storm or subsequent storms, where the crack in the ground is located, is potentially where more erosion could occur and expose graves.

Looking southwest away from Teller. Cemetery edge on left. Looking straight into the "slump zone" that is full of cracks in the ground, and is slanting down towards the beach.

Looking northeast towards Teller. The sunny day made capturing a good photograph in the shadows difficult. The overhanging top of the land can be seen in the upper right. Clumps of topsoil from the upper slumping zone are present down on the beach.

Photos and photo captions taken by: Tom Wolforth , Cultural Resource Manager and Tribal Liaison Alaska Army National Guard; Teller Visit: June 17, 2014

Erosion can be gradual or extreme with each fall/winter storm event. With the storms happening more often and more severely, coastal erosion seems to be happening quicker. Under Governor Palin, a Climate Change Sub-Cabinet was established which then convened the Immediate Action Work Group (IAWG) comprised of federal, state and local officials to come up with ways to protect Alaska's most at-risk communities. Shaktoolik, Shishmaref and Unalakleet (within the Bering Strait's region) were identified by the Immediate Action Work Group as three of six communities identified as imminently threatened. The 2009 Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters on villages threatened by flooding and erosion, identified Golovin, St. Michael, and Teller as imminently threatened by flooding and erosion, in addition to Shaktoolik, Shishmaref and Unalakleet. These threats to life and property still exist today, and are getting worse.

Stebbins, Alaska is not one of the villages listed, but due to last November's fall storm it was hit by high surge waves that overflowed and flooded the community. Stebbins is located on the northwest coast of St. Michael Island, on Norton Sound. It lies 8 miles north of St. Michael and 120 miles southeast of Nome. Currently the population is estimated at 572. Although the State Emergency Coordination Center provided advance warning of the storm, the community did not expect the magnitude of the storm and the potential impact of it, and therefore was not adequately prepared to respond to it.

Stebbins, Alaska flooding photos – November 2013

FEMA needs to speed up the response and recovery process, and should go out to the communities as soon as possible after a known disaster to see its impacts before the clean-up has begun. Also, it is hard for individuals and families to access assistance because of not knowing what is available; making a presence soon after a storm would help those in need. The tribes own limited resources were used to help meet immediate needs after the disaster. Access to emergency funds are needed immediately to address life and safety issues such as obtaining heating fuel, safe drinking water, food, clothing, shelter and communication. Other response

agencies, such as the Alaska Red Cross, local regional health and tribal organizations and other volunteers responded much faster to Stebbins than the federal and state government agencies did.

There is a lack of understanding by federal agencies and personnel regarding the unique living situation of remote Alaska and the challenges rural residents experience on a daily basis. In remote Alaska there are no highways, no docks or ports, and no railways connecting most communities with other hub communities or the lower 48. The only access is via barge from June 1st through September 30th and by air service all year when the weather is navigable. Home owners do not have a Home Depot to go to and if substantial damage is done, they often are not repaired for months, sometimes years. Also, the affects of a storm are not always known or visible until the following spring. If a storm occurs late in the year, it is difficult to assess damages and to meet the timeframes for qualifying for assistance.

Nome, Alaska is the hub community in the region. It is 500 air miles from Anchorage and only has two daily Alaska Airline flights in/out of the city. Many goods and services (such as food, equipment, and building supplies) have to be flown in or barged in during the summer months. With Stebbins, the flood happened last November and work on cleaning the debris from the community is occurring this summer. In Stebbins, four (4) houses were damaged and several homes had water damage inside the home. The outside of these homes look good, but the inside water damage is difficult to clean and it is taking many months to make them livable again.

We are experiencing a housing shortage in Nome, and in the rural villages it may be worse. Several families may live together in one house. When disasters occur, the time it takes to get back to normalcy may take from six months to a year and often times longer due to the challenges that exist and the timeframe one has to wait for supplies to arrive and repair to occur during our short construction season.

Evacuation shelters (supplied with necessities) and alternative evacuation routes are needed in the more vulnerable communities. Preventative measures to slow the effects of erosion and flooding are needed while communities plan for long term solutions. For those communities who may be better off relocating, they are placed in a Catch-22 situation. Efforts to prevent and protect the existing village only prolongs the relocation efforts by thus reducing the urgency to move.

Our federal, state, local and tribal governments are ill-prepared for both the natural disasters that we have already experienced and the potential future natural and man-made disasters in our region. Not only is there a lack of a lead agency spearheading comprehensive efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters, there is a lack of coordination among the agencies that are tasked with carrying out the splintered components of these efforts. In addition, many of our communities/tribes do not have response equipment or assets to assist or support in a disaster. General Manager Matt Melton with Alaska Chadux stated in the July 24th issue of the Nome Nugget Newspaper that "In a real response[such as an oil spill response], we would bring in 50 to 100 people", this does not include Coast Guard or DEC personnel. He further stated, "In a small community like Teller, a large influx of people responding to a spill would stretch the community's capabilities. Plans need to be in place to supply the workers with food, places to rest and sleep after 12 hour shifts."

Our communities alone do not have the resources and the finances to address erosion problems on their own (there are numerous regulations, different studies and environmental documents needed). The Immediate Action Work Group coordinated effort was successful for the six communities it identified as imminently threatened. By the end of 2009, through their efforts Shaktoolik, Shishmaref and Unalakleet had Comprehensive Emergency Plans completed and the training to execute the plans (what is needed is the continued effort to hold drills annually). There has been slow progress with other communities in getting required FEMA plans completed or erosion issues addressed since the IAWG work ended around 2011. The table below lists each community in the Bering Strait Region, population, information on who has completed a Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP), emergency operation plan (EOP) and if the community has a search and rescue group and an established volunteer fire group:

Communities	Population	Completed HMP	Completed EOP	SCERP*	Search & Rescue	Emergency Equipment	Established Volunteer Fire Group	VPSO*
Brevig Mission	326	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2 VPSOs
Diomede	110	No	No	No	No	No	No	Vacant
Elim	294	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Vacant
Gambell	643	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	VPSO
Golovin	154	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	VPSO
Koyuk	368	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	VPSO
Nome	3,695	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	VPSO
Savoonga	712	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Vacant
Shaktoolik	214	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Vacant
Shishmaref	615	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	VPSO
St. Michael	446	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Vacant
Stebbins	612	No	No	No	Yes	No	no	Vacant
Teller	258	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Vacant
Unalakleet	727	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	2 VPSOs
Wales	136	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Vacant
White Mountain	224	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	VPSO

[Shaktoolik, Alaska also has completed a draft – Climate Change Adaptation for At-Risk Community Adaptation Plan. Kawerak was awarded $200,000 to create tribal transportation safety management plans for the 16 tribes in KTP consortium. *SCERP – Small Community Emergency Response Plan; VPSO-Village Public Safety Officer]

We recommend funding to reinvigorate the IAWG, and a commitment from the current Governor to reinstate the working group. The importance and continued need of such a

committee to address the flood and erosion threats that our communities continue to face is vitally important. This was an exemplary model of coordinating State, Federal and local leaders to prioritize projects, coordinate resources and implement projects. The IAWG was an effective Committee that placed upper level staff of agencies and organizations in an arena that allowed for information sharing and important dialogue. The IAWG made recommendations to the State, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies to fund mitigation projects that addressed immediate threats from flooding and erosion. The IAWG also allowed members and leaders from communities that are threatened to share their threats and dire circumstances. Kawerak recommends that if the IAWG is resurrected, and that FEMA could be included to have a key role in the Committee membership. There is a need for the State and federal government programs to come together, problem solve and involve appropriate tribal entities; we are all serving the same constituents.

The picture above is the beginning of the Shaktoolik coastal berm. Photo: Anna Rose MacArthur (KNOM, July 2014) Photo to the right is an aerial photo of Shaktoolik.

Shaktoolik, Alaska is one of the communities that was reported in the 2009 federal Government Accountability Office report as "likely need[ing] to move all at once and as soon as possible." The community recognized that funding was extremely limited and decided to take the initiative upon themselves to begin to address their erosion issue. As reported to KNOM radio, in order to possibly prevent significant damage to infrastructure, and the community and to protect safety and life to residents, the City of Shaktoolik after two years of pooling grant funds from the local Community Development Quota (CDQ) group($620,000), with modified plans from the Department of Transportation, began construction this summer of a driftwood pile, embedded with gravel and backed by a gravel mound. If the berm is properly engineered and maintained as a protective measure for the community, it can be eligible under the FEMA public assistance program if damaged in future storms.

Seawalls are needed, but nearly impossible to obtain due to the cost. The below photos come from Teller, Alaska.

Teller was informed that there could be no repairs to a seawall built in the 1960s. Over the years, more of the shore has eroded, and water damage to the electrical lines of the fuel tanks occurred and the sewage lagoon behind the school was flooded. A seawall could have prevented this from occurring.

After last year's fall storm, Kawerak began efforts to prepare our regional communities to be better prepared for future disasters. An Emergency Management Seminar was held last April, 2014 in Anchorage, Alaska with another one planned for the fall of 2014. This joint seminar sponsored by the Alaska Federation of Natives' Council for Advancement of Alaska Natives, of which our Kawerak President is the Chairperson, the State of Alaska and FEMA participated, is an example of what can work well when key stakeholders jointly work towards solutions. The session focused on best practices, resources available and identified gaps in the disaster process. The group of residents who attended from the regions of Bering Strait, Tanana Chief's Conference and the Association of Village Council Presidents identified the following gaps in disaster preparedness:

- Help more communities develop Small Community Emergency Response Plans (deals with the first 72 hours of a disaster) and Emergency Operation Plans (more long term). Currently, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium has two staff assisting tribal communities with Emergency Operations Plans (EOP), and the State of Alaska works with local municipalities to assist them as well. However, funding is again limited. Establishing an EOP requires professional services, and there are some rural communities who do not even have a municipal government, thus have very little recognition or support from the State of Alaska. Technical assistance and training is needed to be made available through federal and state departments of Homeland Security (in a coordinated manner) and through FEMA.
  Should a tribe seek a disaster declaration directly, having separate tribal plans is redundant in a small community where it is often difficult for a city office to develop a Community Emergency Response Plan or a Hazard Mitigation Plan. Kawerak recommends FEMA allow a tribe to utilize a city plan (if they have one) and/or adopt a city plan as their own in order to meet this requirement.
- Tribes are not able to meet the 25% cost share match if they make disaster declarations requests. Although tribes can declare a disaster directly to FEMA the non-federal cost share is an issue. The Bering Strait region tribes do not have available savings or do not

have industry services such as gaming or mineral resources to generate revenue to meet the required financial cost-share-match. When the State of Alaska declares a disaster and FEMA funds relief efforts, 75% is covered by the federal government and 25% by the State. So from Kawerak's viewpoint, it's actually a detriment to the tribe if they by-pass the state and declare a disaster directly to FEMA. Resources to carry out projects in our region have been very limited and often funding opportunities require a cost-benefit analysis that factors in population or require a local cost-share that is prohibitive.

For example, The USACE cost share for projects is prohibitive. Shishmaref has a revetment project to protect their sewage lagoon and washeteria, and it has been on hold because the tribe needs to come up with an $8 million dollar match. For the Elim harbor the cost-benefit analysis proved not to pan-out because it didn't create new jobs with a new harbor. If a cost-share structure is necessary, there should be consideration for cost-sharing between the federal government and the state government. Tribal governments in Alaska have practically no tax base to afford a cost share.

Red tape that is prohibitive to accessing funds should be identified. A national call to tribes and rural communities to identify barriers should be undertaken. For Alaska, the regional non-profits could coordinate obtaining this information.

- Small communities lack adequate emergency responders and equipment, and the limited responders may experience stress in a disaster as well (they may have personal loses themselves).
- If communication systems go down in an emergency, few communities have a backup communication system and are therefore cut off from communication. Stebbins experienced a loss or spotty communication during the storm. Satellite emergency phones should be made available to all high risk communities.
- Small communities need access to training and technical assistance for disaster planning and drills
- Very few communities have up to date alarm systems or adequate disaster supplies and equipment (generators)
- More rural grant writers are needed to access mitigation funding for emergency preparedness
- Land ownership and legal address problems keep people from getting reimbursement for disaster losses
- Federal and state agency staff land on the ground in an emergency, while locals are still stabilizing the community. They often need housing when there is limited housing for evacuees, and need to talk to the people who are the first responders when they need to be out working. [Kawerak proposes FEMA travel to the site earlier. Since there seems to be differing opinions, FEMA should ask the community to determine what is the best time to travel to the impacted community.]

What seemed to resonate, as I prepared this testimony, was the lack of communication between FEMA and stakeholders. The following recommendations may help improve this:

- Develop a preparedness outreach campaign to educate and inform rural communities on concrete steps they can take to increase their resilience to natural and man-made hazards.
- Improve training and technical assistance opportunities for all rural communities. Allow regional support entities like Kawerak, Inc. to be eligible to apply for funding to provide this kind of support to the tribes that they serve through the establishment of full-time

staff positions, specializing in disaster risk reduction and emergency management. Storms and disasters do not typically only affect one community – in most cases an entire region is affected. Regional plans are needed and the regional non-profits could provide a mechanism to accomplish this, especially in areas where there are no organized boroughs.

- Improve training opportunities in rural Alaska for all emergency preparedness issues, as well as the declaration process and the programs available. Provide travel scholarships so more rural leaders can attend trainings. Provide more village-based training to enable communities to effectively drill and practice emergency plans.
- Use local resources in planning response efforts. The networking of local knowledge holders with those who have the technical knowledge is needed. Local, Regional, Tribal, State and Federal partnerships when disasters occur is needed. If a spill or an incident were to occur in our backyard, our tribal members will not stand by. Our pristine environment and the sea mammals, birds, fish and land animals are at stake. We have Traditional Ecological Knowledge that is valuable in any planning and response effort.
  On July 16, 2014 an oil spill response drill was held in Teller, Alaska. The goal was to determine degree of readiness and to test the logistics of getting oil spill response equipment from Nome to Teller. The Tribal Council President Wesley Okbaok was present and was able to assist the response crew with information about the currents and their behavior in certain wind conditions, as reported in the Nome Nugget Newspaper (July 24, 2014 issue). Cheryl Fultz, environmental compliance specialist with Delta Western, who was present at the drill, stated she learned the most from Wesley. "When you meet a gentleman like Wesley, you realize all of the talent available in the region. The community lives off the sea, and to that end they know every nuance of how the waters behave."
  Within the Bering Strait region, another group called the Bering Sea Alliance (comprised of several communities) formed to address the impacts of increased shipping. This proactive group is working with Shell Oil Company to address issues related to disaster prevention and response.
- Although the State of Alaska developed a Small Community Emergency Response Plan (SCERP) template which provides guidance and assistance to any community that wishes to develop such a plan and it provides valuable information on what to do in the first 72 hours after a disaster, education on disaster assistance processes for communities which have been impacted by disasters is needed. Many of our communities didn't know who to contact or how the process works; those villages more familiar with disasters seem to navigate through the process easier.
  For example, although a disaster declaration was issued for the November 2013 storm, Elim, Alaska did not seek assistance for damage due to the storm to one of their roads. Elim spent a little over $5,000 dollars clearing driftwood and other debris from Moses Point using BIA Road Maintenance funds (Elim receives $42,600 a year in BIA Road Maintenance funds). Elim did not fix the road to its original specs; but removed the debris to make the road passable. Dirt was added to the four mile damaged stretch, of the nine mile road and added an eight foot sand berm on the most vulnerable areas of the road so far this summer. Elim anticipates expending all or more of their BIA Road Maintenance funds to make the road safe and usable. Elim secured an additional $73,000 from a commercial fish company to reinforce the road infrastructure at the end of the

Moses Pt road where boats are parked. Had Elim been aware that they could seek disaster assistance, Elim could possibly have leveraged their roads maintenance funds (and the funds from the commercial fishing company) to help meet match requirements. Therefore, using limited tribal roads maintenance funds in other needed areas.

Another example is with the Stebbins disaster. The Tribal President still doesn't know who the right person is with FEMA to communicate with/to. He didn't know the tribe could seek reimbursement for the expenses they incurred when helping disaster victims after the storm. He heard about the potential to seek reimbursement from a local resident of Nome; not from FEMA personnel. FEMA may be communicating with the City of Stebbins office, but per the Tribal Council President, communication is not occurring with him.

Back in August of 2013, Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island received an Economic Disaster Declaration from the Governor of Alaska. For six months, the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development coordinated and hosted regular teleconferences with both community leadership (city and tribal offices), and agencies who may be able to assist in some way. The calls started out on a weekly basis, then moved to bi-weekly and near the end, on a monthly basis. This was very helpful; FEMA should consider this when a disaster occurs.

- Establish further collaboration with rural communities, tribes and rural resources available. The U.S.C.G. has actively established relationships with, communicated with, and coordinated with tribes in our region. Other agencies such as FEMA, USACOE and the Department of Homeland Security (both state and federal) should follow suit.

The Bering Strait is the gateway in and out of the Arctic Ocean for migrating marine mammals and seabirds. The Bering Strait is also a gateway for maritime transportation. Vessels traveling from the Pacific to the Arctic—or transiting the Arctic using the Northern Sea Route or Northwest Passage—have no choice but to pass through the bottleneck of the Bering Strait. Our life highly revolves around subsistence activities and the marine environment. Increased ship traffic has the potential to significantly impact the marine life/environment and our subsistence way of life. There is a history (1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, in 2004 Selendang Ayu oil spill went aground and resulted in the a spill of approximately 336,000 gallons of fuel oil and diesel fuel) that shows that manmade disasters are sure to occur. The question is not if they will occur, it is when, and are we able to respond to the disasters in a timely fashion.

This is a major concern for the people of the Bering Strait region. At recent food security workshops held by the Alaska Inuit Circumpolar Conference, it was reported that from an Inuit perspective, a threat to food security threatens an entire cultural way of life. The Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil, and the coastal ecosystem injured by the Exxon Valdez spill is still a long way from full recovery. Therefore, a potential spill would have long term social and cultural impacts to the way of life of residents in the Bering Strait region. Its impacts would also be felt by other Alaskan communities outside the region who rely on the animals which migrate through the strait.

The closest US Coast Guard base is in Kodiak, Alaska and that is over 1,000 miles away. It would take over one day of ocean travel by a Cutter, 2 hours by C-130 and 5 hours by HM-60 helicopter. Response agencies such as FEMA, and the Alaska Red Cross are located in

Anchorage, Alaska. There is a huge gap in adequate response time for the Northern Bering Sea and Norton and Kotzebue Sound waters. Response to a disaster will not be immediate, it may take hours and it may even take days depending on the weather.

Up until just a few years ago, the USCG had a Loran Station at Port Clarence in the Bering Strait Region. This station has been shuttered and our region's nearest station is now Kodiak, much too far away. Given the recent increase in ocean vessel traffic through the Bering Strait, increased presence is needed. A permanent USCG base in the Bering Strait, the chokepoint between Russia and Alaska, is needed.

Normal spring hunting conditions include access to open water, availability to secure floating ice, and safe wind directions. In May 2013, unfavorable northerly winds and high ice concentrations along the northern coastlines of Gambell and Savoonga greatly limited access to walrus as they passed through during the spring migration period. The combination of weather factors reduced the number of days during which subsistence hunters would actually be able to access walrus which were located deeper beyond the large ice floes near the communities resulting in a poor walrus harvest. Pacific Walrus is the main food consumed by residents at approximately 120 lbs. each month. It is critical for the continued cultural, nutritional, economic, spiritual well-being, and food security for the residents. The 10-year (2003-2012) average spring walrus harvest for Gambell and Savoonga for the months of March –June is 978 (uncorrected factor). The Native Village of Savoonga and Gambell reported a substantially lower walrus harvest of 180 during the May 2013 subsistence hunting season. Residents rely on the available marine resources as a food source and the lack of a normal walrus harvest has significant economic impacts that prevent additional financial resources from the sale of ivory. The lack of these resources impacts the ability to purchase gas or ammunition to hunt for other available food sources such as seals or birds. Spring 2014 harvest numbers are again lower than normal, and the communities are again bracing for another disaster due to a shortage of food in the community caused by unique weather conditions that impacts hunting. Although the disaster that Gambell and Savoonga experienced was not due to flooding, earthquake or typhoon, the shortage of food created by their natural environment contributed to a dire situation. A response to unique disaster situation such as this, need to be made available.

In conclusion, The Stafford Act is a response when a disaster happens, which is important. But, due to changing climate conditions, changing sea ice conditions and melting permafrost and the extreme variations in the weather, our communities are in imminent danger and preventative measures are needed. No person, in the most developed country in the world, should be subject to the threat of loss of life due to conditions that can be mitigated by governmental actions. The United States provides humanitarian efforts to other countries; often times spending millions of dollars in aid. Our local populations may be small; but we are impacted just the same when disasters occur. We still deserve support and relief, similar to when disaster assistance and support is mobilized to other countries around the world or to lower 48 coastal communities. The U.S. is an arctic nation and has an obligation to assert its sovereign authority and protect national interests. With the authority comes responsibility for disaster prevention, mitigation, and response, especially in an area such as the Bering Strait Region, which is extremely remote and exposed to international ocean traffic.

Thank you for providing time to testify on this important issue.

Additional Storm Photos:

2011 storm photos

Little Diomede:

Golovin:

St. Michael (photo by Charlene Austin):

Shaktoolik (photo by Elmer Bekoalok):

2012 Nome storm photo: