

Andrew Guy Testimony

U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Field Hearing in Bethel, Alaska

Chair Murkowski, Vice Chair Schatz, and Members of the Committee, thank you for convening this field hearing to discuss Typhoon Halong, disaster response, and community resilience.

My name is Andrew Guy, and I serve as President and Chief Executive Officer of Calista Corporation. Calista is the regional Alaska Native Corporation established under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 to resolve the land claims of the Indigenous people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region. We have more than 39,500 Alaska Native Shareholders, with approximately 20,000 living throughout our ancestral Homelands in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region.

For thousands of years, Central Yup'ik communities lived semi-nomadic ways of life that adapted to weather, seasons, river conditions, coastlines, wildlife migration, and changing landscapes. A large part of the resiliency of our ancestors came from our practice of relocation when conditions required it.

That changed when outside governments imposed permanent settlements that put Tribal communities in anchored locations. Many of those locations were chosen without regard to long-term erosion, flooding, storm surge, or environmental change. Today, because of climate change, many of those same communities are among the most vulnerable places in America.

The aftermath of Typhoon Halong demonstrated the vulnerability of our region. The storm affected communities across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region, but the impacts were especially severe in Kipnuk and Kwigillingok. Kipnuk suffered devastating damage across the entire community. In Kwigillingok, many families lost their homes and the storm took the lives of three people. In remote villages where infrastructure is already outdated or insufficient, one storm can easily become a humanitarian crisis.

In response, Calista moved quickly to support the region. We coordinated with Tribal governments, village corporations, local leaders, state agencies, nonprofits, and federal partners to assess immediate needs and communicate conditions across affected communities. We used our regional relationships and logistical capacity to help connect communities with immediate relief, workforce development, cultural support, donations, and long-term recovery planning. We also worked to share timely information with Shareholders and residents, helping families access assistance and recovery programs.

Typhoon Halong demonstrated that environmental disasters are no longer isolated events in the Y-K. Stronger storms, coastal erosion, thawing permafrost, flooding, and changing river conditions are increasing risks of damage to major infrastructure and ways of life throughout western Alaska.

To best support our region, Congress must authorize FEMA to use funds for village relocation efforts. It is neither efficient nor humane to repeatedly spend federal dollars rebuilding in locations that are becoming uninhabitable. Relocation should be recognized as an eligible resilience strategy when recurring flooding, erosion, and storm impacts threaten the future of a village.

We also need legislation to expedite land exchanges and land transfers necessary for relocation and disaster response. In Alaska, communities may identify safer nearby lands, but years of delay involving title issues, jurisdictional boundaries, and overlapping agency processes can prevent timely action. Congress should establish streamlined authority for land exchanges involving federal, state, Tribal, and Alaska Native Corporation lands where public safety and climate threats are at stake.

Relocation aid is part of the federal trust responsibility. The United States played a direct role in concentrating Tribal communities into permanent settlements and creating systems that placed many villages in vulnerable locations. The federal government therefore has a moral and legal obligation to help those communities adapt, protect themselves, and relocate when necessary.

We also urge Congress to provide funding for flood control, coastal erosion protection, and climate resiliency projects along the western Alaska coastline. Communities should not have to wait until catastrophe strikes before receiving help. Preventive investments in levies, breakwaters, berms, drainage improvements, shoreline stabilization, evacuation routes, emergency shelters, backup power, and resilient infrastructure will save lives and reduce long-term costs.

The people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region are resilient, and our communities deserve federal systems that match the urgency of the threats we face and honor Tribal self-determination.

Quyana for the opportunity to testify today. Calista encourages strategic decision making, with input from community members, for efficient long-term solutions. Calista stands ready to work with this Committee, Tribal leaders, and our state and federal partners to build a safer and stronger future for our region.