

THE IMPACT OF THE HISTORIC SALMON  
DECLINES ON THE HEALTH AND WELL-  
BEING OF ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES  
ALONG ARCTIC, YUKON, AND KUSKOKWIM  
RIVERS

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FIELD HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

NOVEMBER 10, 2023

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**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2023**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Bethel, Alaska.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:00 p.m. Alaska Standard Time at Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, Bethel, Alaska, the Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Vice Chair of the Committee, presiding.

**Opening Prayer**

Mr. IGNATIUS LOUIE ANDREW. Good afternoon. I am going to speak a little bit before I say the prayer. On behalf of ONC, the Orutsararmiut Native Council, our tribal community, welcome to our honorable guests, Lisa Murkowski, and her associates and community members of our community who are participating in this important event in finding ways to help one another, to become aware mentally, physically and spiritually, to focus on the well-being and us and others. With that, thank you, and welcome, Lisa Murkowski, and her associates.

Now for the prayer. Tomorrow is Veteran's Day. I will still pray. Our veterans and our service men throughout Alaska, Hawaii, the lower 48 and overseas, let them be safe from all harm and brought home to their families, relatives and friends.

We ask of our Father. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the beautiful, for all resources and wildlife you provided for sustenance for our minds, bodies, and souls. We thank you for having us here together as brothers and sisters, caring for our nature and all you have created. You are praised each and every day.

We ask of you to continue your blessings upon us and for those who continue to care and share what you have entrusted to us. And again, we ask you to guide us for the benefit of all people. Also, to bring the honorable [indiscernible] to their communities, families and friends and relatives. This I ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. LISA MURKOWSKI,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA**

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good afternoon to all those of you who are gathered, to our traditional chief, Mr. Ignatius Louie Andrew, thank you for the invocation. Thank you for your service to our Country. Thank you to all of our veterans, those that are gathered here today, those that are scattered around the Country, and scattered around the world, as we observe Veterans Day today. We can never thank enough those who have stood to defend us and our Country's freedoms.

So to our veterans, I would ask us all to please share our thanks with a simple applause for all who have served.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Before we begin our hearing here today, I would like to thank Dan Winkelman, the President here at YKHC, and all of his staff who have helped us set up today's hearing. As you have worked with my staff, we appreciate all you have done to make it easy to have this conversation today.

I also want to acknowledge the folks on my staff who are here, some of whom you are familiar with, some who you maybe only know their names. Behind me is Amber Ebarb. Amber is the Minority Staff Director for the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C. She is originally from Juneau, family from Juneau? Family from Hoonah. Still a long way from Bethel.

Seated next to Amber is Lucy Murfitt. Lucy is my General Counsel and the Deputy Staff Director on the Indian Affairs Committee.

Monitoring the timing controls, we have Jacqueline Bisille, who is on the Indian Affairs Committee back in Washington, D.C., and Shannon O'Hare, across from her also on the Committee are here are today to help.

We also have Cordelia Kellie, and I do not see her, Cordelia is in the back. She is my Indian Affairs Director for the State of Alaska, and is in and out of your communities very often. So I know that many of you are familiar with Cordelia. And Angela Ramponi is up in front. She is my legislative director based out of Washington, D.C., from Soldotna.

So we are here to not only listen as Alaskans but to help facilitate this hearing for the Senate Indian Affairs Committee.

With that, we shall begin. I call this field hearing of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee to order. The purpose of this hearing is to examine the impact of the historic salmon declines on the health and well-being of Alaska Native communities along the Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers.

I do feel that this is significant. I feel this is historic in many ways, to actually be able to bring the Senate Indian Affairs Committee to Bethel to understand more about how the salmon crashes in the YK region are affecting those of you who live here.

Now, I have traveled through most of your villages over the course of many years. I have been into many of the fish camps up and down the Kuskokwim and the Yukon. I have had so many, so many from this region reach out to tell me about how the lack of salmon is affecting their ways of life and truly, the need for the Federal Government to pay attention, to pay attention, to listen, to understand, and to act.

There has probably been no one more persistent on this need to act than Vivian Korthuis, AVCP's CEO. Thank you, Vivian, for keeping the focus on this important issue. You have been pushing me ever so gently to get this Senate field hearing and the public listening session scheduled. Thank you for that.

This is, again, a great opportunity for witnesses, for members of the community and for those of you from surrounding villages who have purposely come today so that your voices can be heard, for you to share your experiences facing this crisis and to offer potential solutions on the official record.

Know what that means when I say it is an official record. This is not just us talking here. This record will be part of the Senate's hearing record. Your voices, your statements, your solutions, will be included as part of the decision making process that we will embark upon as we move forward.

Subsistence resources, especially the Chinook and chum salmon, have sustained the communities that you live in for millennia. These villages locations were chosen specifically because they were good traditional hunting and fishing areas.

Over 100 communities in the Kuskokwim, Yukon and the Bering Strait region are affected by these low salmon runs, and I hear it, I feel it in your voices when you share with me how painful this is. I was at a regional advisory council meeting not too many months ago and one of the members said very clearly, if we don't fish, we don't eat. It is pretty basic.

We are still trying to understand the root causes of the population crisis. Climate change is certainly a big one, but it is not the sole one. There are multiple other factors, including management structures, that we have to look at. We must work together, because ultimately the loss of salmon threatens your ways of life.

We all have different roles and different ways in which we are working. I work to support our understanding of climate change impacts to fisheries by funding research that will inform future efforts to adapt. Through my role as an appropriator, I have supported tribal co-management efforts, indigenous-led monitoring and co-production of knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge must inform our actions and decisions.

I am interested to hear more from our witnesses about how we can strengthen co-management relationships and help improve the Federal subsistence management program.

I am already working to ensure the Secretary of the Interior has direct supervision of the Office of Subsistence Management by moving it out from under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

We have made some progress together, but I think we all acknowledge that there is much more work to do to ensure that future generations can continue a traditional subsistence way of life. My hope is that we are able to engage in respectful dialogue to find common ground on solutions to what is truly a crisis.

So again, quyanana to all those who have traveled here to Bethel to share your testimony, and those who have come out in the snow to be here. I look forward to hearing the invited testimony from our witnesses today. Each one at this table has a valuable perspective to share.

So a little bit of the ground rules of how we will move forward today, the housekeeping. Each witness at the tables will have five minutes to speak. So please take that opportunity to introduce yourself and to summarize your written testimony. Know that your full written testimony, I have read the testimony that each of you have submitted, that full testimony will be included as part of the record. So this is your opportunity to embellish on that, to share in your five minutes what else you would like to add.

After all of the witnesses testify, I will ask the panel a series of questions, and then when we have concluded that part of the field hearing, we will take about a half hour break, and we will transition to the public listening session. We will rearrange the front of the room here a little bit. That will then be the opportunity for those of you who also want to come forward and provide your comments for the public record. You will have that opportunity to do so.

As a note to our invited witnesses here, I would ask you to please speak into the hand-held mic as well as the table mics. We are, the Senate Indian Committee is livestreaming this hearing online, so we want them to be able to pick up all of that.

With that, I will turn to our first witness, the Honorable Thaddeus Tikiun, Jr., the Chairperson of the Association of Village Council Presidents. Chairman Tikiun, I would ask you to proceed. Quyana.

Chairman, and for all the rest of you, I will point out the timer clock in front of you. It is a countdown clock, and there will be a buzzer after that, which is annoying. But we do have a lot that we want to get on the record today. So I would just point you in that direction. Chairman, if you would proceed.

**STATEMENT OF HON. THADDEUS TIKIUN, JR., CHAIRPERSON,  
ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS**

Mr. TIKIUN. Thank you very much.

Good afternoon. My name is Thad Tikiun. I am the Chairman for the Association of Village Council Presidents, the regional tribal consortia for the 56 federally recognized tribes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the Honorable Senator Lisa Murkowski, other esteemed members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and your staff for traveling to western Alaska for this hearing.

For the past four years, we have felt as if the voices of the tribes, communities and families of western Alaska didn't matter. But by coming here today, you have shown that we do matter. Thank you.

I would like to recognize the representatives from our sister tribal organizations and the regions and tribes who have traveled here today.

For thousands of years, our ancestors have managed our land and rivers and our natural resources. Our ancestors only took what they needed. There was always enough, both for present and future generations.

Subsistence resources, including Chinook and chum salmon, are essential for meeting the nutritional needs of the YK Delta residents, but their importance touches on all aspects of Yup'ik, Cup'ik,



and Athabascan culture, life and identity. Sharing subsistence salmon harvests is a deeply held cultural value in our communities, ensuring the needs of neighbors, elders, and entire communities are well cared for.

During salmon runs, families along the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River gather at fish camps to practice and share traditional knowledge and our ways of life. Fish camps are where families learn essential subsistence skills, pass traditional knowledge through generations, enjoy kinship and cultural growth, and set aside food for the winter. This is how we pass on our way of life.

However, things are very different today. We are in a crisis situation in western Alaska. I am a person who does not use the word crisis loosely. I have never seen salmon returns so low on the Kuskokwim River, where I have lived my whole life, or on the Yukon River, where I have traveled many times and have many friends and family members who live there.

Historically low runs have resulted in significant restrictions on salmon for Chinook and chum salmon reserve stock and to meet escapement goals. Due to the high reliance on wild food, primarily salmon, in our region, these restrictions have a direct and outsized impact on the rural subsistence users along the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers, and have increased the pressure on other fish stocks as communities sought to replace Chinook and chum salmon with other food sources.

While over 100 tribal communities are being restricted to the point of being unable to catch a single salmon, the State of Alaska and some Federal management agencies are carrying on business as usual. There is simply no sense of urgency.

Fisheries management practices that are contributing to the salmon crisis are being allowed to continue, and indigenous and traditional knowledge of the ones who have managed these resources for centuries is being ignored.

In 1977, there was another Congressional hearing in Bethel. At that time, our elders asked Congress to protect our subsistence life and limit State management of subsistence resources. Forty-six years later, we are here again asking for the same thing.

The State's refusal to recognize Federal management on the Federal waters of the Kuskokwim is another example. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, ANILCA, guarantees rural subsistence priority in these waters, yet the State has ignored ANILCA and is trying to [indiscernible] priority in current litigation.

Federal management is also disruptive. Our communities work with the Department of Interior on inter-fisheries management. But from 3 to 200 miles offshore, the Department of Commerce and the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council have ultimate control over salmon fisheries management. The agencies have very different approaches. Interior, under the Federal trust responsibility, has worked with us, but Commerce does not. We need those making management decisions to listen to tribes, listen to communities that are being impacted, include our traditional knowledge, in your decision making process.

Start using current scientific information objectively instead of only focusing on data that supports industry. We are the tipping

point and the State and Federal agencies don't start acting on things within their control, our salmon are not going to recover. I see today's hearing as a turning point on this crisis, because it signals your willingness to support our region and our way of life. It is time for a new path.

Please, one, amend ANILCA to protect once and for all Alaska Native and rural subsistence rights. Two, consider management amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act or other legislation that will prioritize salmon recovery. Include our traditional knowledge and honor the trust responsibility that the United States Government holds to our tribal communities.

AVCP and nearly 100,000 Alaska Natives who are being impacted by this crisis thank you for coming here to listen to us and for taking action. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tikiun follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. THADDEUS TIKIUN, JR., CHAIRPERSON, ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Good afternoon. My name is Thad Tikiun, and I am the chairman of the Association of Village Council Presidents—the regional tribal consortia of the 56 federally recognized Tribes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the honorable Senator Murkowski, other esteemed members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and your staff for traveling to Western Alaska for this hearing. For the past four years, we have felt as if the voices of the Tribes, communities, and families of Western Alaska don't matter. But, by coming here today, you have shown that we do matter. Thank you.

I would also like to recognize the representatives from our sister tribal organizations and the region's Tribes who have traveled here today. Our way of life is inextricably linked with our rivers and our Bering Sea ecosystem, which form the foundation of our culture, our food security, and our collective future. And all of our communities are unified by the central role that salmon play in our cultural, spiritual, and nutritional well-being.

**AVCP is Deeply Concerned About the Health and Existence of Our Communities**

AVCP is a non-profit tribal consortium based in Bethel, Alaska, dedicated to protecting and supporting the interests of its 56 member Tribes and their tribal citizens. Founded in 1964, AVCP provides human, social, and other culturally relevant services to its member Tribes to promote self-determination and protection and enhancement of cultural and traditional values. AVCP's purpose is to promote the common good and social welfare of the region's residents through its programs related to housing, employment, environmental matters, and health services, and to advocate for the region's Tribes and residents. AVCP member Tribes and their tribal citizens speak their original languages and practice a subsistence way of life that has been continuously maintained since time immemorial.

AVCP's member Tribes are located in communities throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (YK Delta) in an area of approximately 59,000 square miles. The YK Delta is named after the two large rivers in the area: the Yukon River and the Kuskokwim River. Many AVCP communities are located along these rivers and originated from traditional hunting areas or fish camps. The YK Delta is not accessible by roads and the rivers and tributaries provide connectivity between communities as well as access to important subsistence resources, including fish like Chinook and chum salmon. Households in the region experience more food insecurity than in other areas of the state and nation. Salmon make up over 50 percent of the region's subsistence harvests.<sup>1</sup> Over half of the Chinook salmon caught for subsistence across the state are caught in the Kuskokwim region, where salmon are over 85 percent of the subsistence harvest by poundage.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> KUSKOKWIM RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION, SALMON SITUATION REPORT 4 (Sept. 2021).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

Subsistence resources, including Chinook and chum salmon, are essential for meeting the nutritional needs of YK Delta residents but their importance extends into all aspects of Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Athabascan cultural life and identity. Sharing subsistence salmon harvests is a deeply-held cultural value in our region's communities, as it ensures that neighbors, elders, and the entire community are well cared for. Participating in subsistence activities is also fundamental for the transmission of our culture: during salmon runs, families along the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River gather at fish camps to practice and share traditional knowledge and Our Way of Life. Fish camps are where families learn essential subsistence skills, pass Traditional Knowledge through generations, enjoy kinship and cultural growth, and set aside food for leaner seasons.

### **The Loss of Salmon is a Crisis for Our Rivers, Our Communities, and Our Way of Life**

Unfortunately those days of abundance are gone and we are now in a crisis situation in Western Alaska—and I am not a person who uses the word “crisis” loosely. I have never seen salmon returns so low on the Kuskokwim River, where I have lived my whole life, or on the Yukon River, where I have traveled many times and have many friends and family members who live there. This crisis is unlike any other in living memory.

Chinook and chum salmon numbers have declined precipitously during the past several years. 2021 was the eighth year that Chinook runs were too low to support subsistence fishing needs and the first year that once-abundant chum salmon returns were lower than Chinook runs.<sup>3</sup> These low return numbers resulted in significant restrictions on fishing for both species to preserve stocks and meet escapement goals. Due to the high reliance on wild food, primarily salmon, in the region, these restrictions have a direct and outsized impact on the rural subsistence users along the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River and have increased the pressure on other fish stocks as communities sought to replace Chinook and chum salmon with other food sources.<sup>4</sup>

In 2022, the multi-species salmon collapse continued and resulted in the “complete closure of much of the coho salmon run,” making the 2022 season “the most restricted subsistence fishing season ever seen on the Kuskokwim.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the 2022 chum salmon run appeared “to be the second lowest chum salmon return on record, better only than the 2021 return.” Not long ago chum salmon “used to return to middle and headwaters tributaries in the millions, feeding more than just human subsistence users, but bears, vegetation, and other life. The lack of chum salmon in tributary valleys has the potential to significantly affect the health of the Kuskokwim ecosystem.”<sup>6</sup>

On the Kuskokwim, Yukon, and in the Bering Strait region, over 100 tribal communities are being greatly impacted by these low salmon runs. And while we are being restricted to the point of being unable to catch a single salmon, the State of Alaska and some federal management agencies are carrying on business as usual.

### **Current Fisheries Management Structures Are Unwilling to Address the Salmon Crisis**

Since time immemorial, our people relied on our Traditional Knowledge to take care of and steward the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River so that fish would return the following summer. We managed the salmon harvests in accordance with our traditional rules and values, and we managed it well. Yet now State management and disjointed federal management have resulted in this crisis.

Taking State management first, as one of the leading Alaska law treatises states, “[i]t is a fact of Alaska political life that the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is dominated by non-native urban, sport, and commercial hunting and fishing interests.”<sup>7</sup> The State has long prioritized commercial and sport fishing, to the detriment of our subsistence resources. This is not a new issue. Congress has been to Bethel before and heard the same messages from our aunts and uncles and grandparents before us.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 7; see also Robert J. Wolfe & Joseph Spaeder, People and Salmon of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Drainages and Norton Sound: Fishery Harvests, Culture Change, and Local Knowledge Systems, AM. FISHERIES SOC'Y SYMPOSIUM 70, 373 (2009).

<sup>5</sup> KUSKOKWIM RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION, KUSKOKWIM RIVER SALMON SITUATION REPORT 3 (Oct. 3, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>7</sup> DAVID CASE & DAVID VOLUCK, ALASKA NATIVES AND AMERICAN LAWS 294 (3d ed. 2012)

Forty-six years ago in 1977, the House Subcommittee on General Oversight and Alaska Lands came here, to Bethel, and held an afternoon hearing at Bethel High School. At that hearing, Representative Udall told attendees that Congress wanted to make “decisions knowing what your needs are and what you think and what you believe.”<sup>8</sup> And at that hearing, our elders asked Congress to (1) protect our subsistence rights, and (2) curtail State management of subsistence resources.

For example, Charlie Kairaiiak testified that the federal refuge that was then being contemplated by Congress “should be run by cooperative management between Federal Government and the local people because we do not trust the State anymore.”<sup>9</sup> When asked about the draft bill’s proposal for local subsistence boards, Glen Fredericks testified that he thought it was a good idea because “we have better relations with the federal government,” specifically the Department of Interior and its U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.<sup>10</sup> Harold Sparck spoke to the failures and hostility of state management: “Right now, we have our people lock-stepped into a system of laws and regulations that prohibits them from being the way they are. We have laws that make people criminals and they are only practicing their lifestyle.”<sup>11</sup>

These comments left an impression. At a hearing in the Interior a week after the Bethel hearing, Representative Udall stated “[o]n this subsistence question, my bill gives priority to subsistence use. If there is one thing we have heard all over this State, it is the emphasis by the Native people on the importance of subsistence.”<sup>12</sup> Committee member Representative Seiberling likewise confirmed that in “all of the native villages” he had visited, “the natives prefer to have the” federal government “instead of the State because their experience with State management has” not prioritized subsistence users<sup>13</sup>—a criticism for which Alaska Governor Jay Hammond candidly admitted to the Subcommittee that there was “some justification, I must admit.”<sup>14</sup>

Three years later Congress enacted the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). In Title VIII of ANILCA, Congress expressly recognized that subsistence is “essential to the Native physical, economic, traditional, and cultural existence and to non-Native physical, economic, traditional, and social existence.”<sup>15</sup> In order to ensure these values were protected in perpetuity, Congress provided rural residents a priority for customary and traditional subsistence uses above other purposes on federal lands and waters.<sup>16</sup>

But ANILCA’s protections apply only to federal lands and waters. On State lands and State waters (extending out to three miles offshore), State management still effectively prioritizes commercial and sport interests. For example, the State Board of Fisheries has been unwilling to take any action to reign in intercept fisheries. These State-managed fisheries continue to catch enormous amounts of salmon, while salmon returns to our rivers are at historic lows.

And even on federal lands and waters the State is not acting in the best interests of our communities and rural subsistence users. For example, the State is currently fighting federal management of the federal waters of the Kuskokwim River. In *U.S. v. Alaska*, case no. 1:22-cv-00054-SLG, the State of Alaska filed a brief on September 1, 2023, in which it argued that the Katie John line of cases should be overturned, which would end the federal subsistence priority, the regional advisory council framework, and local co-management of the river, all of which AVCP suggested to Congress over forty-five years ago.

As for the federal government, its salmon management is disjointed. While tribal communities in our region work cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of Interior on in-river management, fisheries management 3 to 200 miles offshore is governed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) and the Department of Commerce. Like the Alaska Board of Fisheries, the NPFMC is dominated by members who are employed by or are otherwise loyal to large, private commercial fishing interests (many of which are located out-of-state

<sup>8</sup>*Inclusion of Alaska Lands in Nat’l Park, Forest Wildlife Refuge, & Wild & Scenic River Sys. (1977): Hr’gs on H.R. 39 Before the Subcomm. on Gen. Oversight & Alaska Lands of the House Comm. on Interior & Insular Affs.*, 95th Cong., pt. XIII, at 2 [hereinafter GOAL Hearings, Part XIII].

<sup>9</sup>*Id.* at 21.

<sup>10</sup>*Id.* at 10 (exchange between Mr. Fredericks and Representative Seiberling).

<sup>11</sup>*Id.* at 28.

<sup>12</sup>*Id.* at 114.

<sup>13</sup>*Id.* at 115.

<sup>14</sup>*Inclusion of Alaska Lands in Nat’l Park, Forest Wildlife Refuge, & Wild & Scenic River Sys. (1977): Hr’gs on H.R. 39 Before the Subcomm. on Gen. Oversight & Alaska Lands of the House Comm. on Interior & Insular Affs.*, 95th Cong., pt. XII, at 12.

<sup>15</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 3111(1).

<sup>16</sup> 16 U.S.C. §§ 3102(2), (3), 3112, 3114.

and are in some cases foreign-owned). And like the State of Alaska, the U.S. Department of Commerce has done little to protect salmon stocks and, by extension, our communities.

Together the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Department of Commerce have overseen the long-term, catastrophic decline of salmon runs in Western and Interior Alaska. Neither have taken substantial actions to preserve what is left of our salmon runs, much less restore them. There is simply no sense of urgency—both continue business as usual, and in so doing ignore the health and cultural wellbeing of our YK Delta tribal communities.

As Elder Dorothy Napoleon told Congress here in Bethel over four decades ago, “AVCP is concerned about the future of the people living here and their children’s future.”<sup>17</sup> AVCP remains committed to protecting and maintaining the region’s natural resources so that current and future generations of rural residents can continue to practice a traditional subsistence way of life. Current salmon management is fractured, inadequate, and inequitable. It is time for a new path. Please (1) amend ANILCA to protect, once and for all, Alaska Native and rural subsistence hunting and fishing rights, and ensure our peoples’ ability to co-manage these resources, and (2) consider amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act or other legislation that will prioritize salmon recovery, include our Traditional Knowledge, and honor the trust responsibility that the United States government owes to our tribal communities.

I see today’s hearing as turning point in this crisis, because it signals your willingness to support our region, and Our Way of Life. AVCP and the nearly 100,000 Alaska Natives who are being impacted by this crisis thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Chairman.  
Chief Ridley?

**STATEMENT OF HON. BRIAN RIDLEY, CHIEF/CHAIRMAN,  
TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE**

Mr. RIDLEY. Thank you, Senator, for having us here. I want to thank YKHC and the other native organizations here for hosting us.

My name is Brian Ridley and I am the Chief-Chairman of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, which serves 37 federally recognized tribes within interior Alaska. I am a tribal member of the Native village of Eagle, located on the Yukon River at the Canadian border. My family is Han Gwich’in and we have relatives on both sides of the Canadian border, which is why we meeting true escapement goals are so important to me. The tribes along the Yukon have completely shouldered all of the ramifications of the salmon collapse, yet they were not the cause of it.

The State of Alaska is telling us that the only way that our salmon stocks can be rebuilt is in hatcheries. However, recent science clearly demonstrates that hatcheries are not the solution, as the State and others suggest. Calling for millions more in research is a stall tactic by the industry to keep doing what they have been doing.

As of today, prohibited species catch of salmon is over 130,000 salmon. While Federal staff and North Pacific Fisheries Management Council managers say it is only 1 to 3 percent of the catch, we know that every salmon counts.

Trawlers throw away our fish and keep fishing, while our fisheries are closed, our smokehouses are empty, and our people are criminals for catching just one fish. Our children have never handled salmon. Our fishermen are depressed, and the results are devastating our communities.

<sup>17</sup> GOAL Hearings, Part XIII, at 18.

Here is what we and our member tribes have been doing. Our tribes implemented a self-imposed moratorium which allowed the U.S. to meet Chinook salmon escapement goals into Canada in 2018. To provide protein, sustenance, and heritage, we are now supporting commercial fisheries by buying salmon for our people. In 2022, we distributed over 90,000 pounds of salmon, including purchase, shipping, storage, and packaging. And in 2023, we distributed another 90,000 pounds.

You want to subsidize commercial fishermen for fishing too much? Then you can pay our million-dollar expense as we try to buy salmon for our people.

We tried to seek State Board of Fish action to mitigate, intercept and protect subsistence fisheries as required by the law. They took no action, and in a three to four vote, two of the four said it was all about the money. The problem with North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the State Board of Fish is these boards are made up of industry representatives responsible for over-fishing our oceans.

We also briefed and requested intervention from our State legislature, to no avail. We briefed and requested Secretarial intervention and use of withdraw authority, to no avail.

With little choice, we finally have engaged in litigation in an attempt to have NOAA/NMFS follow the law. I am here to ask you, the SCIA, Congress, and the Federal Government, to uphold the promise Congress made to our people during land claims. I am here to ask you to uphold your trust responsibility to our tribal governments and citizens as enshrined in Federal Indian law.

We are urging the Committee and the Administration to help bring our fish back before they go extinct and are an endangered species. Stop subsidizing the pollock and cod industries through USDA purchasing surplus fish under the Section 32 program. This only rewards over-fishing.

Stop minimizing the impact of trawlers and of bycatch and the long-term cumulative impacts associated with this practice. In any other harvest of fish and wildlife, the word for "bycatch" is wanton waste. It is illegal and goes against our Native traditional values.

Amend and reauthorize the MSA to provide for disaster declaration and subsequent relief for loss of subsistence fisheries. Add at least two tribal seats to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. Relocate the National Marine Fisheries Service from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Interior to center sustainability of fisheries and food security over economic interests.

Introduce legislation recognizing Alaska Native tribal hunting and fishing rights. Utilize and encourage DOI Secretarial authority to protect the subsistence needs of the Alaska Native people.

If we made a mistake, it was trusting the State and Feds to manage a resource that we managed for thousands of years. In the short 65 years, our fish are nearly going extinct.

The bottom line is the only path forward is co-management or management by our Native people. We are not trying to shut down trawling, but get them to cut back and share in the conservation.

The biggest issue that I see is our fish are trying to make it through the State Area M and then the Federal Bering Sea. We are

just trying to get all those areas to cut back a little bit to help us conserve and bring back our fish.

Thank you. Mahsi' Choo.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ridley follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. BRIAN RIDLEY, CHIEF/CHAIRMAN, TANANA CHIEFS  
CONFERENCE

My name is Brian Ridley and I serve as the Chief-Chairman of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, which serves 37 federally recognized sovereign Tribal governments and 43 tribal communities located in the Interior Alaska whose homelands approximate the size of Texas. I am a Tribal Citizen of Eagle, Alaska, located on the Yukon River at the Canadian border. My family is Han Gwichin and we have relatives on both sides of the Canadian border. The Tribes along the Yukon, particularly those upriver, have completely shouldered all of the ramifications of the salmon collapse, yet they are not complicit in the decline.

The indigenous people of the TCC region have been living in a relationship with salmon since time immemorial. Western scientists recently documented our customary and traditional use of salmon in the Tanana Valley beginning at least 11,000 years ago. This is the earliest evidence of human relationships with salmon in all of North America. Our people are salmon people. Our health and the health of the salmon are linked, the salmon suffer and our people suffer.

The science is clear, it is not a debate: all Yukon River salmon stocks are in dire peril. The State of Alaska is telling us that the only way that Canadian Chinook and fall chum salmon stocks can be rebuilt is with hatcheries. However, recent science clearly demonstrates that hatcheries are not the solution as the State of Alaska and many others have suggested.

Many things contribute to the declines of Yukon River salmon populations, from climate change, heat stress, interception fisheries, bycatch, competition with hatchery fish, ichthyophonous, rising ocean temperatures and ocean acidification. However, we must focus on those areas within direct human control and we must take management actions immediately. Calling for more research is not enough.

Salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea commercial fisheries, including pollock, has been blamed by many for the demise of salmon fisheries in the Yukon River and throughout coastal western Alaska.

There's a reason for this: as of today, the prohibited species catch of salmon is over 130 thousand salmon, the vast majority of which are chum. While federal staff and NPFMC managers continue to diminish the impact of salmon bycatch in federal fisheries of the Bering Sea, we know that every salmon matters whether it's in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, or attempting to reach spawning grounds in Canada on the Yukon River. Trawlers throw our fish away and keep fishing. While our fisheries are closed. Our smokehouses empty.

All but bycatch allows the pursuit of annual fishery disaster declarations for salmon fisheries for the Yukon River. Bycatch, on the other hand, is controlled by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and not an allowable cause for a declaration of fisheries disaster under the MSA. Most troubling is the fact that federal fishery disaster declarations are largely for commercial fisheries economic losses. However, under the MSA, loss of a subsistence fishermen may receive a disaster declaration if an economic fishery disaster hinders the customary and traditional selling, bartering, and trading economy of the fishery.

This is absolutely the case along the Yukon River, where depleted salmon runs have prevented our salmon people from fishing, and from participating in traditional economic practices of selling, bartering, and trading. Further, totally unaddressed through existing federal processes is the loss of Tribal food sovereignty and food security, the ability to teach our children and transmit Indigenous Knowledge related to salmon stewardship, including providing for healthy salmon and salmon populations, processing, preparation, and storing. Entire social networks, health, and wellbeing has been devastated. Our children have never handled salmon, our fishermen slump into depression and the results are devastating our communities.

While the state and federal government have continued conducting studies on the impacts of climate change, debating the impacts of bycatch and intercept fisheries, and subsidizing commercial fisheries, here is what we and our member Tribes have been doing:

- We have not fished. We implemented a self-imposed moratorium in an attempt to allow spawning fish the best possible chance, which resulted in meeting Chinook salmon border passage goals into Canada that year.

- We have left fish camps empty—many of our children have not fished in their lifetime.
- We were told to buy 7.5 inch mesh nets for our people, so we bought 7.5 inch nets
- We were told to buy 6 inch nets for our people, so we bought 6 in nets
- We were told to buy 4 inch nets for our people, so we bought 4 in nets
- To provide protein, sustenance, and heritage, we are now supporting commercial fisheries by buying salmon for our people; in 2022 we distributed over 90 thousand pounds of salmon including purchase, shipping, charters, storage, and packaging, and in 2023 we distributed another 90 thousand pounds.
- We have educated ourselves on ocean fisheries science;
- We have spent thousands on legal action and advocacy including:
  - Ensuring passage of Resolutions at the Alaska Federations of Natives and National Congress of American Indians urging for the mitigation of intercept fisheries and trawler fleet bycatch;
  - Facilitating historic Tribal representation to seek BOF action to mitigate intercept and protect subsistence fisheries as required by law—they took no action in a 3 to 4 vote, not unanimous;
  - Continuing attendance at the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council to address ongoing bycatch and destructive trawler fleet fishing practices—again to no avail, as these boards are made up of industry representatives responsible for overfishing our oceans;
  - Briefed and requested intervention from our state legislature—to no avail;
  - Briefed and requested Secretarial intervention and use of withdrawal authority—to no avail;
  - Left with little choice, we finally have engaged in litigation in an attempt to have NOAA/NMFS follow the law.

I am here to ask you, the SCIA, Congress and the Federal Government, to uphold the promise Congress made to our people during land claims. I am here to ask you to uphold your trust responsibility to our Tribal Governments and citizens as enshrined in Federal Indian Law.

We are urging the Committee to work with the Alaska Congressional Delegation, including Congresswoman Peltola, the US House and Senate Natural Resources Subcommittees, and the Administration to help bring our fish back. Our asks:

- Stop subsidizing the pollock and cod industries through the USDA practice of purchasing ‘surplus’ pollock and cod trawled from the Bering Sea under the section 32 program.
- Stop minimizing the impact of trawlers and of bycatch, and the LONG TERM CUMULATIVE IMPACTS associated with this practice. In any other harvest of fish and wildlife, the word for ‘bycatch’ is wanton waste.
- Amend and reauthorize the MSA to:
  - adequately provide for Disaster Declaration and subsequent relief for loss of subsistence fisheries and the ways of life they support;
  - add at least two Tribal seats to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council appointed by the Secretary of the Interior.
- Relocate the National Marine Fisheries Service from the Department of Commerce to the Department of the Interior to center sustainability of fisheries ecosystems and food security over economic interests of multi-billion dollar industrial commercial fishing corporations without regard for ecosystem impacts.
- Introduce legislation recognizing Alaska Native Tribal Hunting and Fishing Rights.
- Per the Congressional Promise, utilize DOI Secretarial Authority to “protect the subsistence needs of the Natives.” This could include the entire Yukon River, and critical state and federal waters of the South Alaska Peninsula currently managed by the Alaska Board of Fisheries, and bycatch hot spots within the Bering Sea.
- Ensure Congress, and all agencies within the federal government, within the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Interior, and State uphold their Federal Trust obligations to the federally recognized Tribes of all Alaska as mandated by Federal Indian Law.

Mahsi’ Choo.  
**Attachment**



The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) appreciates the opportunity to submit additional written testimony regarding the “The Impact of the Historic Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities along Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers.”

TCC is an intertribal consortium of 42 Tribal communities, including 37 federally recognized Indian Tribes, located throughout Alaska’s interior. TCC serves approximately 18,000 Alaska Natives in Fairbanks, where our headquarters is located, and in the rural villages located along the 1,400 miles of the Yukon River and its tributaries. Our villages are remote, often without road access, and largely inaccessible by car. Alaska Native residents must overcome many challenges to sustain healthy communities, educate our children, ensure our safety, and care for our elders. Given the complicated land status in Alaska, Tribes often lack designated territory to provide services or the ability to adequately protect the lands they have for future generations. Compounding these challenges, we now have a Yukon River without fish, whether caused by climate change, years of mismanagement, commercial overfishing, or any other reason, means our people face severe food insecurity.

The indigenous people of the TCC region have been living in a relationship with salmon since time immemorial. Western scientists recently documented our customary and traditional use of salmon in the Tanana Valley beginning at least 11,000 years ago. This is the earliest evidence of human relationships with salmon in all of North America. Our people are salmon people. Our health and the health of the salmon are linked, the salmon suffer and our people suffer.

TCC appreciates the questions of Senator Murkowski during the hearing and would like to provide responses below.

**What does it mean when your primary food source is not available?**

TCC’s member tribes and beneficiaries depended on salmon as a significant portion of their diets. The Eastern Interior Regional Advisory Council includes 20 TCC member tribes.<sup>1</sup> Reviewing data from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Community Subsistence Information System,<sup>2</sup> during the 1980s and 1990s, salmon species made up 68 percent of their subsistence harvest, which was equivalent to 1,051,366 edible pounds. In the 2000s and 2010s, salmon species made up 62 percent of their subsistence harvest, which was equivalent to 368,677 edible pounds. The Western Interior Regional Advisory Council includes 19 TCC member tribes,<sup>3</sup> and during the 1980s and 1990s, salmon species made up 55 percent of their subsistence harvest, which was equivalent to 974,385 edible pounds. In the 2000s and 2010s, salmon species made up 44 percent of their subsistence harvest, which was equivalent to 200,199 edible pounds. It can be estimated that salmon comprised 53 percent of the diets of tribal community members in the TCC region.

When salmon is not available, TCC tribal members face a food insecurity crisis.

1. Many villages are far removed from well-stocked grocery stores. Access to fresh fruit, vegetables, and healthy meat and fish are limited, too expensive, and not a replacement for harvesting wild foods.
2. Availability of other fish species are not available. The salmon crash has increased regulations on the Yukon River, which limits tribal members’ ability to subsist for other species. Gear type on the Yukon River allows four-inch nets, which many of our tribal members do not have or do not have the means to purchase. In the summer of 2023, it was reported to TCC at sub-regional meetings that Tribal members attempted to target white fish and other non-salmon species and had little to no success.
3. Hunting is not a viable supplement or replacement for salmon. Village residents continue to witness increased numbers of outside hunters in their traditional use areas, impacting traditional hunting opportunities for species that would be targeted in years of poor salmon runs. Additionally, game is facing similar climate change challenges with changes in weather, seasons, and food sources available to them.

It is important to highlight that salmon does not only affect humans. Salmon is the primary food source for a number of our animal relatives and the lack of salmon is creating havoc in the ecosystem. During salmon runs, bears will selectively eat the fattiest parts of the salmon, leaving the carcass behind that provides food to other species, like wolves, fox, birds, and insects. Nitrogen from salmon is further spread to trees through feces expelled from wildlife. Lastly, nutrients not absorbed

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/regions/ei\\_communities](https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/regions/ei_communities)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/sb/CSIS/index.cfm?ADFG=harvInfo.fedSubData>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/regions/wi\\_communities](https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/regions/wi_communities)

flow back in the stream to the ocean, where tiny organisms eat and regenerate the ocean's ecosystem. The lack of salmon is disrupting the ecosystem that had provided for generations under tribal stewardship.

When the primary food source is not available in our villages, it means our tribal members have no alternatives. Their only option is to purchase low-quality foods, often times high in sugar and starch, from local grocery stores to feed their families because it is the only thing they can afford. Not having salmon, our primary food source, is a form of cultural genocide. Our tribal members are once again forced out of our ways of life to conform to Western civilization.

**What are the impacts when families cannot harvest together?**

Harvesting salmon is ceremonial. What is eaten and what is left untouched are often life lessons retold from the elders to their young through storytelling. Each family member at camp is responsible for a job and share a sense of community and responsibility. Fish camp is hard work and builds life skills. Traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering embodies who our Tribes are as people, and provides important context and foundation to our way of life.

Our bodies are on a cycle attuned to the environment. When the mosquitoes are out in full force, the sun is up deep into the night, and the cottonwood starts to fly, it signals it is time for fish camp. When there is no fish camp, we cannot do what the land tells our bodies to do. It creates an imbalance. We cannot satisfy this urge, and people face a sense of loss. There is nothing that can replace this tradition.

Consider this analogy, imagine Christmas—each year your family has a tradition of putting up the Christmas tree, decorating, gathering, each person is responsible for a dish, opening presents, etc. Imagine if one year your whole community lost the ability to celebrate Christmas. Imagine how you would feel without the tradition and togetherness. Imagine how your children would feel without the feeling of wonder and excitement. Now imagine, you could not celebrate Christmas for four years and you have young children that have never experienced it.

When our families cannot harvest salmon, it has reverberations that devastate individuals, families and communities. We mourn the salmon. We mourn the rituals and ceremonies. We mourn our way of life.

**Are you concerned that we will continue to see greater healthcare and mental health challenges when you do not have traditional food sources?**

At its base, fishing provides access to healthy nutrients and fats that help combat food related diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. The act of going to fish camp, preparing camp, fishing, and processing fish is hard, physical activity. From dusk to dawn, families are working. Also, it helps families stay busy and maintain focus in the present moment, which is ideal for mental health.

TCC provides healthcare and mental health services to the Interior 42 communities. We are very concerned about the impacts on healthcare and mental health. In fact, TCC is already seeing the lack of healthy nutrients and fats impacting our tribal members. Over the last 10 years, the salmon crisis is likely a contributing factor to the number of diabetic and pre-diabetic patients due to increased food insecurity and lifestyle changes.

The Alaska Native diabetes prevalence statewide increased from 5.2 percent in 2009 to 6.3 percent in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Diabetes prevalence for Interior Alaska in 2019 was 6.9 percent, 0.6 percent above the statewide prevalence. TCC's data for Interior region Alaska natives had the following increases in diabetic and pre-diabetic data:

Increase in patients with	2013 to 2016	2016 to 2019	2019 to 2023
Diabetes	24.6%	11.3%	24.6%
Pre-diabetic patients	21.9%	19%	70%

*Between 2019 to 2023, there was a 70 percent increase in pre-diabetic patients. The lack of salmon is clearly already affecting our health and will continue to decline our tribal member's health. TCC is very concerned that in the long term, we will see an increase in cancer prevalence and other diseases due to the food insecurity and lack of quality food our tribal members are facing. Alaska will then be facing a health crisis in addition to a salmon crisis.*

<sup>4</sup> [https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/Diabetes/burden/2019\\_AlaskaDiabetesBurdenReport.pdf](https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/Diabetes/burden/2019_AlaskaDiabetesBurdenReport.pdf)

**Are we incorporating the input of local people who have the local knowledge given on how the salmon is managed?**

The state management is antagonistic with tribal subsistence activities as the state prioritizes commercial and recreational fishing and hunting activities. Commercial and recreational users generate revenue for the State of Alaska and the State places a premium on those users' ability to hunt and fish. Subsistence users do not have the same voice in the State's decisionmaking process and our needs and access to subsistence opportunities are not treated on par with those of commercial and recreational users.

The Alaska Board of Fisheries and Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) continue to remain largely unconcerned about the dwindling Yukon River salmon returns. For example, despite 23 years of ineffective state management in improving returns of the Yukon River Chinook salmon as a Yield Concern established in 2000, no higher level of Stock of Concern designation has been made to be consistent with their own Sustainable Salmon Fisheries Management Policy (5 AAC 39.222). Yukon River Chinook salmon should at a minimum be considered a Stock of Management Concern, if not the most severe Conservation Concern given that ADF&G Commissioner's statements that the only viable way of rebuilding Canadian-origin Chinook and chum salmon is through hatcheries, which TCC and Yukon River Intertribal Fish Commission both oppose.

Further, federal agencies defer to the state and its management decisionmaking which undercuts tribal subsistence users and traditional and local knowledge. The federal government and agencies have a trust duty and obligation to ensure that state management decisions impacting tribal subsistence users are not rubber stamped. Federal agencies should plot their own management course and decisions in partnership with tribes when state management decisions undercut tribal sovereignty and disadvantage tribal subsistence users.

For local and indigenous knowledge to be adequately included in salmon management and research, it must be fully integrated into how decision are made. This would include:

1. Having Alaska Natives tribal representative seat on the Board of Fish and North Pacific Fisheries Management Council in a meaningful not tokenized way. This has long been a request of TCC, and is the only way to ensure indigenous knowledge is included in decisionmaking.
2. Provide ample opportunity for Alaska Native participation in Board of Fish and North Pacific Fisheries Management Council processes, including testimony and participation in "committee of the whole" through ensuring online and telephonic participation options. Currently, the Board of Fish boasts it represents the best public process of fisheries management in the United States, yet with meetings only held in urban centers is still largely inaccessible to those it impacts the most. Alaska Natives spend hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to travel and participate in the Board and councils, yet they receive no funding to do so.

As recognized by the Office of the President and the Office of the Secretary, the federal and state government must include Indigenous knowledge when making management decisions. Alaska Native subsistence users must be integrated into process, management, research, and decisionmaking at all levels.

**How do you build capacity on co-management?**

Tribes have been stewards of the land since time immemorial and our Indigenous knowledge is invaluable. Tribes offer solutions based on Indigenous knowledge from administration, financial management, and planning, to documented observation and data collection networks, to regulatory analysis. Tribes have already proved they can effectively manage the lands and waters. We have been on these lands for over a millennia, and before colonization, you could not see evidence of our ancestors on the land.

*The lack of co-stewardship agreements is due to the lack of permanent, recurring and noncompetitive funding.* You build capacity on co-management by not only talking about co-management and co-stewardship, but also by allocating adequate and recurring funds that reflect the government's commitment. Three co-management organizations in Alaska receive Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Management/Development Program line item Alaska Subsistence Projects funding. They must apply and compete for this funding annually, and receive it a year and a half after the start of the fiscal year.

The Departments should work to fully implement Joint Secretarial Order No. 3403 (Nov. 15, 2021) to ensure tribes have a meaningful role in the management and stewardship of federal lands of special geographic, historic, and cultural signifi-

cance. Tribes must be afforded the opportunity and adequate funding to manage federal lands of special geographic importance. To achieve this, Tribes should be provided 638 contracts for this management and the Departments should include a request for increased, noncompetitive, recurring funding for Alaska tribes into its budget request to Congress. The request should include a specific budget line item for tribal natural resources management in Alaska.

#### **Ideas on how to fix the disjointed salmon management?**

TCC continues to face difficulties on salmon management. Salmon do not know boundaries. On their migration from the spawning grounds to the ocean and back, they go through matrices of jurisdiction, which impedes change. Often, TCC and Tribes are faced with one Board saying it is the responsibility of the Council and then have the Council say it is the responsibility of the Board, all of which prevents any significant action in salmon management.

TCC calls for an ocean to headwaters permanent interagency Yukon River Salmon effort for comprehensive management assessment of Yukon River Salmon led by Tribes to address the disjointed salmon management.

#### **Proposed management activities that have been rejected?**

1. In December 2021, TCC, along with other regional Tribal organizations, submitted an emergency petition to the Secretary of Commerce asking her help to address the severe and unforeseen ecological, economic, social, and public health concerns affecting Western and Interior Alaska communities due to the salmon crisis. Specifically, the petition asked the Secretary to take emergency action to eliminate Chinook salmon bycatch and set a cap on chum salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock trawl fishery in the 2022 season. It also asked the Secretary to engage in meaningful consultation with Western and Interior Alaska Tribes to develop long-term measures to reduce salmon bycatch, ensure the long-term health of salmon stocks in Western and Interior Alaska, and meet the subsistence needs of communities in the regions. The Secretary denied our request for emergency action on January 25, 2022. The petition and the denial letter are posted on TCC's website here: <https://www.tananachiefs.org/emergencypetition-to-reduce-salmon-bycatch-denied/>.

2. In October 2022, TCC and member Tribes participated in a tribal consultation meeting with the Department of the Interior and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on fisheries protection and restoration issues. During the consultation, tribal leaders and subsistence users throughout the region stepped forward to demand action from the federal and state governments for the devastating salmon decline that has been impacting Tribes on the Yukon River. No significant action has happened.

3. In February 2023, the Alaska Board of Fisheries failed to adopt Proposal 140 that aimed to reduce the allowed commercial fishing times and catch area by 60 percent in Area M during the month of June to protect Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim chum salmon from severe commercial interception. Instead, the Board of Fisheries approved the industry plan to reduce fishing time by 12 percent. Alaska Native peoples from throughout the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim walked out of the meeting after a failed vote of 3-4 for their proposal.

4. In October 2023, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting was held where the Council reviewed a preliminary analysis on the Bering Sea Chum Bycatch Management. TCC and the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission asked the Council to take immediate regulatory action and define the set of alternatives to analyze to reduce Western Alaska Chum and Chinook prohibited species catch, specifically requesting the Council to include a zero Chum and Chinook cap in its analysis despite industry perspectives saying that such an alternative is unrealistic. The Council approved analyzing a set of alternative that change current Chum bycatch management measures, but failed to include a zero Chum and Chinook cap as requested by Tribes.

Despite all these and other asks by TCC and the Interior Alaska Tribes calling on the federal and state governments for action on the salmon decline, no significant action has taken place.

#### **Ideas to improve subsistence management now without legislation?**

TCC urges the Department of Interior to initiate a rulemaking to update the regulations governing Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). TCC has prepared and attached a list of several substantive changes that will ensure tribal members will have better access to subsistence opportunities while improving the management of subsistence activities in Alaska. The revisions can be categorized as follows:

1. Organization Changes:
  - a. Relocating the Office of Subsistence Management within the Office of the Secretary; ensuring adequate Subsistence User and Tribal representation on the Board; and ensuring appropriate appointment of Regional Advisory Council Members.
  - b. Relocating the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) within the Department of the Interior. This was the original location of NMFS until 1970.
2. Support the Federal Trust Responsibility: Clarifying Delegation of Authority to Federally Recognized Tribal Governments.
3. Clarify Procedural Processes: Clarifying Emergency Procedures and ensuring Regional Advisory Councils inform federal decisionmaking affecting subsistence.

TCC would also ask the Departments to review the 2010 Federal Subsistence Management Assessment. The recommendations outlined in that report were largely ignored but are still relevant today.

TCC wants to emphasize the importance to prioritize fish disaster funds to subsistence fishermen and tribal consortiums. The most troubling fact is that federal fishery disaster declarations are largely for commercial fisheries economic losses. Under the Magnuson Stevens Act, loss of a subsistence fishermen may receive a disaster declaration if an economic fishery disaster hinders the customary and traditional selling, bartering, and trading economy of the fishery. Unaddressed through existing federal processes is the loss of Tribal food sovereignty and food security, the ability to teach our children and transmit Indigenous Knowledge related to salmon stewardship, including providing for healthy salmon and salmon populations, processing, preparation, and storing. Entire social networks, health, and wellbeing has been devastated. Our children have never handled salmon, our fishermen slump into depression and the results are devastating our communities. In fact, to provide protein, sustenance, and heritage, TCC is supporting commercial fisheries by buying salmon for our people; in 2022 we distributed over 90 thousand pounds of salmon, including purchase, shipping, charters, storage, and packaging, and in 2023 we spent over \$850,000 to distribute another 90 thousand pounds.

Salmon is life to our people living on the Yukon River. Our Athabascan people are resilient and have relied upon many species of animals and fish to survive for millennia and they continue to do so today. Protecting subsistence, including salmon, and our traditional way of life are top priorities for TCC. The preservation of Yukon River salmon goes beyond securing food—it is about being able to practice our traditional activities and being able to share that knowledge with our future generations.

The salmon population is facing extremely challenging environments. A variety of factors are impacting our salmon, including warming ocean and river temperatures, water levels, bycatch of salmon in the commercial fisheries in the Bering Sea, disease and parasites, and poor diet among other stresses. Salmon cannot recover if they cannot make it to the spawning grounds. Every salmon counts and there is a critical need to err on the side of conservation during severely depressed escapements to ensure their livelihood for future generations.

TCC thanks you for your leadership and for conducting this important hearing. It is our sincere hope that this hearing and its advice will not be a hollow undertaking like so many consultations, but that it will result in actual action and change to salmon management that will lead to more salmon reaching their spawning grounds.

The Attachment—Proposed Federal Subsistence Management CFR Amendments—NOVEMBER 8TH 2022 has been retained in the Committee files.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Chief Ridley.  
We will now turn to Chairman Samuelson.

**STATEMENT OF JONATHAN SAMUELSON, CHAIR, KUSKOKWIM  
RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION**

Mr. SAMUELSON. [Geeting in Native tongue.] Good afternoon. My name is Jonathan Samuelson. I was raised right here on the front streets of Bethel where my family gathered and worked on fish ever summer. Eventually, I made my way up the river, pits stops in Aniak and Red Devil, and then we resettled in McGrath, where

I learned of the very, very utmost importance of escapement and fish that need to make it all the way up the river.

Every summer, my family returns to Georgetown, which is right in the middle of the river, and we put away fish for winter. At least we try. That is where we go to spend time with our people and our kin.

Welcome to my first home, Senator. Please understand that there is not enough time to go into detail how grateful we are for your support in our co-management work and efforts in helping to get funding trickle down to tribes and the commissions here on the river, and all of our rivers. I do want to take one moment to acknowledge the veterans who are here today and are from our region.

I serve on the tribal council for the Village of Georgetown. I serve as Vice President of the Kuskokwim Corporation, my village corporation. I serve as the current chair of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and I have to wear all these hats to leverage the indigenous and holistic approaches to stewardship. I have to go to all of these things and be all these things just to have our world view and our lens visible.

Our salmon, our neqa, they are not corporate or tribal or Federal or State. They are our source of nutrition and our source of wellness. The ecosystem health and the connectedness that we understand as indigenous people and stewards of these lands and waters has the answers to the salmon crisis. It is not on me that we walked through the emergency room to get here, at this beautiful new facility, because we are in a state of emergency.

Tribal co-stewardship has already been doing the work of reparation to the trauma our salmon have faced. We have already been rebuilding our stocks, we have been doing everything that we can to make sure the salmon is sustainable and has a chance of a future. It just goes to show that the knowledge that we all carry and the things that we know have the answers. The answers are here, and we are ready and willing to lead this work.

From the late 1980s to 2018, our region has had an increase in the suicide rate by 143 percent, 143 percent. These are lives not reaching their potential, providers, aunties, uncles, grandparents, not reaching their potential. When you couple that with Chief Ridley's message of 137,000 salmon in bycatch, lives not reaching their potential, wasted. Fish are missing from our ceremonies, they are missing from our potlaches, our grieving processes.

One of the hardest illnesses to combat comes from not being able to share. We are meant to be able to share with our aunties, to share with our invited guests fish, salmon. We cannot do that. Our protocols are being broken, our values are being challenged, and our way of life is at risk, and that only elevates our unwellness.

We are not new to salmon declines nor are we new to colonization, erasure, or genocide. Our resilience, however, continues to be stretched thinner and thinner and tested. We find ourselves having to advocate more and more just for access to a way of life that is designed for community and collective well-being, let alone the time to breathe and practice those ways of life.

Economics and food security need to be touched on, but I won't spend too much time there. I will note, my people have not put me

here to fight for a commercial fishery, but there has not been viable commercial fishery on the Kuskokwim River for well over a decade.

We are here for cultural sovereignty and security. You will hear the cries from our people. You will hear and see the pain in just a little while that continues to grow in our region.

Alaska needs support for co-stewardship efforts in these ways: pushing the National Marine Fisheries Service to develop co-stewardship agreements with us; pushing for at least two voting seats on the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. We need non-competitive, dedicated, stable funding so that we are not forced to fight amongst each other as we have been forced to do in many other aspects of our lives. We need designated tribal seats at the North Pacific and on all their associated bodies.

Congress needs to amend ANILCA to secure our traditional hunting and fishing rights in every part of every river of Alaska. Senator, you have the amazing opportunity to lead this charge with your peers.

The Federal Government has a trust responsibility to uphold. Closer to home, we have to trust our Congressional delegation will work for the health and sustainability of all of Alaska.

I want to trust that these comments will not be forgotten after the box is checked. I want to trust that you know the action that needs to be taken and policy that needs to be changed.

I want to note that five minutes is not enough time, and similarly, we are forced to try to teach our people to be genuine human beings in 6 to 12 hour windows or not at all in the Yukon, where there is no fishing opportunity, where there are children who have never seen or touched a salmon. Who are salmon people; who are meant to carry our existence into the future.

I want to trust that we will give back to our children a world with healthy salmon.

[The prepared statement of Chair Samuelson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JONATHAN SAMUELSON, CHAIR, KUSKOKWIM RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION

My name is Jonathan Samuelson and I serve as the current Chair of Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC). I was born and raised on the Kuskokwim River and am of Yupiaq and Dené decent. I am a citizen of the Native Village of Georgetown, for whom I am the duly appointed Commissioner to KRITFC. I was raised right here on the lower Kuskokwim in Bethel, finished growing up near the headwaters in McGrath, and spent my summers with my family in the mid-river. My ancestors have fished and stewarded in our traditional ways for generations and my family and I return each year to Georgetown to harvest, cut, dry, and smoke *neqa*, salmon.

In May 2015, the KRITFC was formed as a consortium to represent the 33 federally recognized Alaska Native Tribes that are located along the Kuskokwim River. This historical unity of the Tribes was driven by our understanding, and insistence, that we must have at least a comanagement role if our salmon and way of life are to survive. Each tribe appoints a Commissioner to the KRITFC who is authorized to make decisions on behalf of the Tribe. The Commissioners elect seven of their own members to serve on an Executive Council, and five representatives to serve as In-Season Managers alongside U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to make collaborative in-season fishery decisions, per the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between KRITFC and USFWS.<sup>1</sup> KRITFC is guided by the wisdom

<sup>1</sup>“Memorandum of Understanding between United States Department of the Interior U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Region and Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission,”

of our Elder Advisors—the late Robert Lekander and *Caggaq* James Nicori—as well as our Traditional Knowledge and the best available Western science. KRITFC strives to achieve consensus in all decisions and to work together, river-wide, with our Tribes.

Senator Murkowski, I appreciate the opportunity to share KRITFC’s perspectives on the historic, as well as contemporary, impacts of salmon collapses on the health and well-being of our Arctic- Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) communities. It is my hope that these comments—and the comments of the other Expert Witnesses and the public—will illuminate the crisis that has unfolded in our communities and ecosystems with immense, interconnected consequences for our well-being, including our physical, cultural, and spiritual health; and prompt meaningful action from Congress for our salmon and Tribes.

Before beginning, I would like to extend my gratitude to Senator Murkowski and her staff for holding this Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (Committee) field hearing in our region, and in the homelands of our salmon. Senator, we are grateful for your support of KRITFC’s Tribal costewardship and fisheries research work since our inception, and this field hearing is one more example of your engagement with our Tribes. I also want to say *quyana* to the Association of Village Council Presidents for encouraging and organizing this event, as well as to the many Tribal and community leaders who traveled to Bethel to gather and raise their voices today.

For over a decade, Kuskokwim Tribal communities have experienced multi-species salmon declines with devastating impacts for our food security and physical health, culture and knowledge exchanges, traditional and commercial fishery economies, and ecosystem balance. *Taryaquak, gas*, Chinook salmon were the first to precipitously decline around 2009, followed in recent years by chum and coho salmon.<sup>2</sup> These declines have prompted consecutive years of fishery closures to all user groups, including rural and Indigenous subsistence fishing families, to conserve and rebuild salmon runs by getting as many spawners as possible to lay their eggs in the gravel. The 2022 and 2023 fishing seasons were some of the most restrictive seasons on record because they presented some of the worst salmon returns in living memory.<sup>3</sup>

Year after year, our communities are sacrificing our harvests, salmon protein, and time at fish camp—core elements of our traditional ways of life—to protect vulnerable salmon populations and strive to meet spawner escapement goals. Yet we are not seeing similar sacrifices on the part of other fisheries, like Alaska Peninsula (Area M) commercial salmon fisheries and Bering Sea pollock trawl fisheries, that impact the strength of our salmon and, in turn, of our communities.

It is key to understand that the health and well-being of our Alaska Native communities on the Kuskokwim is intrinsically linked to the health of our salmon, ecosystems, and economies. When our salmon are healthy, our people, our land, our river, and our non-human relatives are healthy. These health benefits mutually reinforce one another; they are interconnected.

In times of salmon abundance, our families can put away enough fish to sustain our children, Elders, and everyone in between through the winter. We are physically healthier because we can rely upon the protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin D from salmon to meet our nutrient needs<sup>4</sup> instead of buying food from our stores, which often has low nutritional content at exorbitant prices, exacerbating both poverty and high rates of diet-related diseases like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.<sup>5</sup>

May 11, 2016, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/5dcb2a0ebc75324ecc635451/1573595663976/MOU\\_Final\\_wSignatures.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/5dcb2a0ebc75324ecc635451/1573595663976/MOU_Final_wSignatures.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See KRITFC, “2021 Kuskokwim River Salmon Situation Report,” September 21, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/61f30d22d43e4066d2fb4d8f/1643318621130/FINAL+Kusko+Salmon+Situation+Report+to-print.pdf>. KRITFC, “2022 Kuskokwim River Salmon Situation Report,” February 17, 2023, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/6442d7509d059e4a859eada7/1682102125040/2\\_022+Kusko+Situation+Report\\_Feb+23\\_complete+fbpp\\_printed.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/6442d7509d059e4a859eada7/1682102125040/2_022+Kusko+Situation+Report_Feb+23_complete+fbpp_printed.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> KRITFC, “2022 Situation Report,” 3. See also KRITFC, “2023 End-of-Season Summary,” October 2023, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/65382f244a92ca079706dd80/1698180924749/Kuskokwim\\_EOS+Summary\\_final\\_linked+copy.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afdc3d5e74940913f78773d/t/65382f244a92ca079706dd80/1698180924749/Kuskokwim_EOS+Summary_final_linked+copy.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> R. Singleton, G. Day, T. Thomas, J. Klejka, D. Lenaker, and J. Berner, “Association of Maternal Vitamin D Deficiency with Early Childhood Caries,” *Journal of Dental Research* 98, no. 5 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022034519834518>. Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, “Alaska Native Health Status Report,” 2021, <http://anthctoday.org/epicenter/publications/HealthStatusReport/Alaska-Native-Health-Status-Report-3rd-Edition.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> ANTHC, “Health Status Report,” 2021. Valerie B.B. Jernigan, Kimberly R. Huyser, Jimmy Valdes, and Vanessa W. Simonds, “Food Insecurity Among American Indians and Alaska Na-



We are mentally healthier because the practicing our traditional ways of life and spending time at fish camp releases endorphins, discourages the use of substances, and connects our Elders with our youth.<sup>6</sup> We are financially healthier because we spend less money buying processed food and on healthcare costs due to poor nutrition,<sup>7</sup> and we may earn money from smallscale commercial salmon fisheries. Our ecosystem is healthier from the marine-derived nutrients of salmon eggs and spawned-out salmon carcasses, sustaining the health and abundance of other traditional food sources like moose, bears, caribou, berries, and migratory birds; these consequently sustain us and our physical, financial, and cultural health. Salmon are the heart of it all.<sup>8</sup>

It is also imperative to understand that salmon declines are nothing new to our Tribes. The Traditional Knowledge of our Elders and Western science alike record periodic oscillations in all salmon species' historic abundance. For instance, chum salmon experienced a steep decline in the early 2000s before climbing up in abundance again.<sup>9</sup> Similar trends in Chinook salmon abundance have occurred for generations.<sup>10</sup> Over millennia, our Tribes have honed the values and traditions of our Indigenous stewardship to adapt to salmon declines: listening to our Elders' wisdom to take only what we need and can process, share in times of abundance and scarcity, and honor the life a salmon gives to our nets by not wasting a single part of it. Our reciprocal stewardship relationship with the salmon has fostered both of our health and well-being on the Kuskokwim; we have evolved together over millennia to sustain one another.

What is new to our communities are salmon collapses without successive rebounds in abundance. This happened first with Kuskokwim Chinook salmon, whose populations have stabilized but not risen in abundance despite the co-management of KRITFC and USFWS and attainment of rebuilding escapement goals at the expense of our communities' harvests. Chum and coho salmon are also now showing indicators of this trend in continued low abundance. We believe, through the data of both Traditional Knowledge and Western science, that this is influenced by the climate change and the removal of Indigenous voices and stewardship practices from contemporary fisheries management.

Climate change can be linked to many factors cumulatively contributing to today's salmon catastrophes, including pre-spawn mortality<sup>11</sup> and spawner/egg nutrient deficiency<sup>12</sup> due to freshwater heat stress, declined juvenile survival in the first year at sea,<sup>13</sup> and decreased marine prey abundance<sup>14</sup> linked to decreases in female body and egg size.<sup>15</sup> We now consider salmon that return to the Kuskokwim to

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tives: A National Profile Using the Current Population Survey-Food Security Supplement," *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 12, no. 1 (2017). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19320248.2016.1227750>.

<sup>6</sup>See for example Karie Marie Norgaard, "The Effects of Altered Diet on the Health of the Karuk People," 2005, [https://sipnuuk.karuk.us/system/files/atoms/file/AFRIFoodSecurity\\_UCB\\_SaraReid\\_001\\_009.pdf](https://sipnuuk.karuk.us/system/files/atoms/file/AFRIFoodSecurity_UCB_SaraReid_001_009.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>ANTHC, "Health Status Report," 2021.

<sup>8</sup>See for example Jessica C. Walsh, Jane E. Pendray, Sean C. Godwin, Kyle A. Artelle, Holly K. Kindsvater, Rachel D. Field, Jennifer N. Harding, Noel R. Swain, and John D. Reynolds, "Relationships between Pacific Salmon and Aquatic and Terrestrial Ecosystems: Implications for Ecosystem-Based Management," *Ecology* 101, no. 9 (2020), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002%2Fecy.3060>.

<sup>9</sup>KRITFC, "2022 Situation Report," 6.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Vanessa R. von Biela, Lizabeth Bowen, Stephen D. McCormick, Michael P. Carey, Daniel S. Donnelly, Shannon Waters, Amy M. Regish, Sarah M. Laske, Randy J. Brown, Sean Larson, Stanley Zuray, and Christian E. Zimmerman, "Evidence of Prevalent Heat Stress in Yukon River Chinook Salmon," *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* 77, no. 12 (2020), 1878–1892. <https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfas-2020-0209>.

<sup>12</sup>Kathrine G. Howard and Vanessa von Biela, "Adult Spawners: A Critical Period for Subarctic Chinook Salmon in a Changing Climate," *Global Change Biology* 27, no. 7 (2023), 1759–1773. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.16610>.

<sup>13</sup>James M. Murphy, Kathrine G. Howard, Jeanette C. Gann, Kristin C. Cieciel, William D. Templin, Charles M. Guthrie III, "Juvenile Chinook Salmon Abundance in the Northern Bering Sea: Implications for Future Returns and Fisheries in the Yukon River," *Deep Sea Research Part II: Topical Studies in Oceanography* 135 (2017), 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsr2.2016.06.002>.

<sup>14</sup>William W. L. Cheung and Thomas L. Fr"hlcher, "Marine Heat Waves Exacerbate Climate Change Impacts for Fisheries in the Northeast Pacific," *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 6678 (2020), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-63650-z>.

<sup>15</sup>Jan Ohlberger, Daniel E. Schindler, Randy J. Brown, Joel M.S. Harding, Milo D. Adkinson, Lara Horstmann, and Joe Spaeder, "The Reproductive Value of Large Females: Consequences of Shifts in Demographic Structure for Population Reproductive Potential in Chinook Salmon,"

Continued

spawn as “climate change survivors” holding the genetic strength to withstand these stressors that is crucial to their offspring’s survival. While climate change is not easily or directly controllable by fishery management entities like the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and USFWS, addressing the impacts of commercial fishery bycatch and meaningful integration of Tribes into management processes are. Yet it is climate change that receives the blame for our salmon crises without considering the fallacy of Western management principles that have eroded thousands of years of Indigenous stewardship principles and pushed salmon over the brink.

KRITFC’s collaborative management partnership with USFWS—now in its eighth year under our MOU—has started to change fishery management practices within the Kuskokwim drainage. Through this government-to-government partnership, local, Indigenous people work alongside USFWS to make fishery management decisions based on Traditional Knowledge, local observations, and the best available Western scientific information for the benefit of rural subsistence users and salmon. We are not seeing commensurate changes to fishery management practices in the Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean under NMFS’ and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council’s (NPFMC) guidance that have immediate impacts to AYK salmon, and thus to AYK community health. Our co-stewardship only goes so far when it conserves returning adult salmon but does not encourage conservation-based management during the bulk of their lives in the marine environment.

Subsistence communities are the only fishery stakeholders presently forced to make sacrifices during this unprecedented salmon crisis. It is horribly painful for our Tribes to adhere to self-imposed harvest sacrifices with devastating consequences to our health and simultaneously hear NMFS and NPFMC leadership sternly declare, if not scold us, that our recommendations to meaningfully reduce salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery—to reduce one manageable stressor to salmon abundance—are not “practicable” because they may reduce commercial trawl fishery profits without making a ‘significant’ difference to salmon abundance.<sup>16</sup> It seems some sacrifices are deemed necessary, while others inconceivable, to maintain the status quo. It is quite clear that our Elders’ wisdom to create no waste and to balance what we take from the ecosystem with what we give (a very basic principle of sustainable ecological management) is being ignored. That our Tribes have elevated these discrepancies to no avail for decades, and loudly in recent years, is even more disheartening.

Despite our historical stewardship of salmon and traditional foods in the Bering Sea, our voice has been erased from modern-day marine fishery management; decisions are made without the consent of our sovereign Tribal governments; and we have no appeals process to address this systemic disempowerment and inequity. KRITFC wants to change this regime, and we want to work together to strategize solutions for the long-term survival of AYK salmon and Tribes.

To do so, we ask this Committee to continue to support co-stewardship efforts in the AYK and Bering Sea regions, including through support for Tribal representation in management processes. Developing strong co-management relationships between Tribes and federal agencies is critical and has proven successful for stabilizing and recovering declining species while also safeguarding the cultures and health of Tribal and subsistence communities. KRITFC urges you to push federal agencies, including and especially NMFS, to work with us to develop co-stewardship agreements that integrate our voices, values, and Traditional Knowledge into management practices. We also urge you to support adding two voting Tribal seats to the NPFMC, appointed by Alaska Native Tribes to the Secretary of Commerce, via the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and to encourage the NPFMC to create designated Tribal seats on all the associated bodies that support its decision-making.

Senator Murkowski, we applaud the work you have done to support AYK salmon populations through Congressionally directed spending in support of research, monitoring, and comanagement. We are grateful for your critical work to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which is now funding the Gravel-to-Gravel Initiative—a new initiative co-led by federal agencies and Tribes to recover salmon and restore their habitat in the AYK region. We appreciate your support for greater Tribal representation on the NPFMC. We especially thank you for your leadership to include language in the Fiscal Year 24 Appropriations Bill to reposition the Office of Subsistence Management to the Interior Secretary’s Office; as well as for your role in

Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences 77, no. 8 (2020), 1292–1301. <https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfas-2020-0012>.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Jon Kurland, comment on the record, North Pacific Fishery Management Council, October 8, 2023, 09:23:50, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X\\_KhP9Mmkk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X_KhP9Mmkk).

codeveloping the December 2021 Salmon Roundtable and the Alaska Salmon Research Task Force with Senator Sullivan and the late Rep. Young.

It is now critical to take another step toward meaningful, cooperative trust relationships to develop meaningful, decisive management actions with the inclusion of our stewardship and Traditional Knowledge. Our Tribes understand salmon, and we want to sustain them for the health and wellbeing of our ecosystems, and for this and future generations. KRITFC asks you, Senator, to lead this Committee to help federal agencies like NMFS to see the value in broadening their knowledge base with the inclusion of our stewardship and Traditional Knowledge; and encourage these agencies to work directly with us and other AYK Tribes and Tribal organizations to respond to our salmon and corresponding health crisis. To do this, we know we will all need to sacrifice and shift away from status quo management and harvests. We know that redesigning management regimes will not be simple, but it will be most effective when centered on Indigenous voices; aimed toward holistic, justice-driven actions; inclusive of Traditional Knowledge; and responsive to the interconnectedness of our community and ecosystem health. This is the path forward to sustaining well-being, food security, economic opportunity, and environmental justice for this and future generations, and we ask for the Committee's help realizing this.

KRITFC believes it is possible to strengthen the resilience of the ecosystem to restore and maintain a healthy, biodiverse system that provides for salmon returns to our rivers and streams, in turn providing for our health. But it will take a broad range of knowledge, commitment, and sacrifice by all—not just Tribes. We must be willing to work together with respect, recognize each other's needs, and be willing to sacrifice to meet the tremendous challenges ahead. This is especially critical in today's era of climate change and its resounding cumulative impacts unlike anything any of us have seen before, but to which we must respond rapidly. Just as Congress and the federal government have shown throughout history their power to remove Tribes from policy solutions, you also have the power to change the course of this disaster by bringing us to the table. Let our Tribes help the federal government, and one another, to address salmon declines, climate change, and the impacts on our communities. As our Elders tell us, we will all be closer to wellness if we work together.

We look forward to further discussions and work with you, Senator Murkowski, and with this Committee toward our common goal: to protect and restore salmon and revitalize the health of our communities and ecosystems.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Samuelson.  
Next, we will hear from Chair Ulvi.

**STATEMENT OF KARMA ULVI, FIRST CHIEF, VILLAGE OF EAGLE, ALASKA; CHAIRWOMAN, YUKON RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION**

Ms. ULVI. Thank you, Honorable Lisa Murkowski, and Indian Affairs Committee. My name is Chief Karma Ulvi. I am the First Chief of the Native Village of Eagle and the Chairwoman of the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

I am here today to provide this testimony on behalf of 38 tribes of the Yukon River that have joined the commission so far. Despite the thousands of years we have been practicing our ways of life and stewarding salmon for future generations, colonization of Alaska by settlers to extract and commodify our resources has in a few short centuries dramatically affected our tribal ways of life.

The lack of salmon fishing opportunities on the Yukon River jeopardizes our ability to teach our children those ways of life and how to properly steward our tribal resources for future generations.

The salmon decline is not a new issue. We have witnessed drastic salmon decline since settlers first came to Alaska. Over 100 years ago, in 1905, a report to Congress on conditions and needs of Alaska Natives stated that the rush of prospectors had literally

swept the country clean, denuding it of life, leading to destitution and semi-starvation.

The report directly called for a moratorium on commercial fishing North of the Aleutians, due to the importance of Yukon and Kuskokwim fisheries to the Interior. This call has been made numerous times since, and has never been implemented.

During the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act debates of 1971, which supposedly resulted in the extinguishment of our aboriginal hunting and fishing rights, and for which we were never compensated, a Congressional promise was made, a promise that the Secretary will take any action necessary to protect the subsistence needs of the Natives.

This includes using their withdrawal authority on appropriate lands or water and classify them in a manner which will protect Alaska Native subsistence needs and requirements by closing appropriate lands or waters to entry by non-residents, when the subsistence resources are being slammed, are in short supply or otherwise threatened. The promise has never been realized.

In recent decades, the return of salmon to the Yukon River have continued to decline and resulted in State and Federal fisheries disaster declarations and closures to commercial salmon harvest. More recently, the continued collapse of Yukon River Chinook and chum salmon returns has resulted in closures to sport and recreational salmon fishing and priority State and Federal subsistence salmon fisheries, with profound impacts to tribal food security.

Decades of poor salmon returns have resulted in our relatives and neighbors in Canada not being able to practice customary and traditional indigenous fisheries for 20 to 30 years, and tribal communities in Alaska now face those same challenges.

In 2020, there were directed Chinook and summer chum salmon subsistence six-inch mesh gillnet fishing opportunities on a reduced schedule on the lower and middle Yukon River. There was also a limited commercial fishery using the nets for summer chum salmon down in the lower river.

There were also directed subsistence gillnet fishing opportunities for fall chum salmon in 2020 for downriver and middle Districts 1 through 4, some on reduced subsistence fishing schedules. But on August 12th, subsistence fishing was closed without any directed fall chum subsistence gillnet fishing provided for Districts 5 or 6, which includes every village from Tanana up, both the Yukon and Tanana Rivers. This is why upriver residents often testify that they have been closed for subsistence salmon gillnet fishing for four years, and not just three like the middle and lower river.

This has been a problem under State management of the Yukon River. Commercial fishing rights for those living downriver are shutting down our subsistence fishing upriver. This flies in the face of both State and Federal subsistence priority laws.

We have had no directed summer chum salmon subsistence gillnet harvest opportunities on the Yukon for the past three years. This is also true for fall chum for the most part. However, there was a limited directed Yukon fall chum subsistence gillnet fishery in 2023 on the Teedriinjik drainage that opened on September 15th.

Tanana Chiefs Conference urges this committee to work with the Department of Interior Bureaus to formalize a Federal-tribal co-stewardship fishery management partnership between the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. National Park Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey Alaska Science Center based upon the model of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

The conservation of wild Yukon River Chinook salmon and the tribal ways of life they support, not to mention the United States treaty obligations to Canada, would all benefit greatly from such a formalized fisheries management partnership that directly involves Yukon River tribes and our extensive indigenous knowledge.

Mahsi' Choo.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ulvi follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KARMA ULVI, FIRST CHIEF, VILLAGE OF EAGLE, ALASKA;  
CHAIRWOMAN, YUKON RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION

My name is Karma Ulvi, and I am the First Chief of the Native Village of Eagle and the Chairwoman of the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. I'm here today to provide this testimony on behalf of all the Tribes of the Yukon River that have joined the commission so far. As Tribes keep joining the commission, our number of Member Tribes keeps changing, so I believe we now have 30 Tribes participating. We are hosting our biennial meeting next week in Anchorage at the Eagan Center.

Despite the thousands of years we have been practicing our ways of life and stewarding salmon for future generations, colonization of Alaska by settlers to extract and commodify our resources has in a few short centuries dramatically affected our tribal ways of life. The lack of salmon fishing opportunities on the Yukon River jeopardizes our ability to teach our children those ways of life and how to properly steward our tribal resources for future generations.

The salmon decline is not a new issue, we have witnessed drastic salmon declines since settlers first came to Alaska. Over one hundred years ago in the 1905 Report to Congress on Conditions and Needs of Alaska Natives it stated that the ". . . rush of prospectors has literally swept the country clean, denuding it of life. . . leading to destitution and semi-starvation." (Emmons, 1905) The report directly called for a moratorium on commercial fishing north of the Aleutians due to the importance of Yukon and Kuskokwim fisheries to the interior. This call has been made numerous times since and has never been implemented.

During the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act debates of 1971, which supposedly resulted in the extinguishment of our aboriginal hunting and fishing rights and for which we were never compensated, a Congressional promise was made—a promise that the Secretary will "take any action necessary to protect the subsistence needs of the Natives." This included using their withdrawal authority on "appropriate lands or waters and classify them in a manner which would protect Alaska Native subsistence needs and requirements by closing appropriate lands or waters to entry by non-residents when the subsistence resources of these lands are in short supply or otherwise threatened." This promise has never been realized.

In recent decades, the returns of salmon to the Yukon River have continued to decline and resulted in state and federal fishery disaster declarations and closures to commercial salmon harvests. More recently, the continued collapse of Yukon River Chinook and chum salmon returns have resulted in closures to sport and recreational salmon fishing and priority state and federal subsistence salmon fisheries with profound impacts to tribal food security. Decades of poor salmon returns have resulted in our relatives and neighbors in Canada not being able to practice customary and traditional indigenous fisheries for 20–30 years, and Tribal communities in Alaska now face these same challenges.

In 2020, there were directed Chinook and summer chum salmon subsistence 6-inch mesh gillnet fishing opportunities on a reduced schedule on the lower and middle Yukon River (see Table 2 of 2020 Summer Season Summary). There was also a limited commercial fishery using dip nets for summer chum salmon in the lower river.

There were also directed subsistence gillnet fishing opportunities for fall chum salmon in 2020 for downriver and middle Districts 1–4, some on reduced subsistence

fishing schedules, but on August 12 subsistence fishing was closed without any directed fall chum subsistence gillnet fishing provided for Districts 5 or 6, which includes every village from Tanana up both the Yukon and Tanana rivers. This is why upriver residents often testify that they have been closed to subsistence salmon gillnet fishing for 4 years and not just 3 years like the middle and lower river. This has long been a problem under state management of the Yukon River: commercial fishing provided for those living downriver and then shutting down our subsistence fishing upriver. This flies in the face of both state and federal subsistence priority laws.

We have had no directed Chinook or summer chum salmon subsistence gillnet harvest opportunities on the Yukon River for the past three years: 2021–2023. This is also true for fall chum for the most part. However, there was a limited directed Yukon fall chum subsistence gillnet fishery in 2023 on the Teedriinjik (Chandalar River) drainage that opened on September 15, but only residents of Arctic Village and Venetie really had the opportunity to benefit.

During the 10-year period between 2013 and 2022, the Yukon River Chinook salmon Canadian border passage goal of 42,500–55,000 fish has been achieved only 50 percent of the time under State of Alaska management (not met in 2013, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

In contrast, the formal federal fisheries management partnership between the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, to which Tanana Chiefs Conference is a signatory, has consistently met the State of Alaska's Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon drainage-wide escapement goal. In fact, during the 10-year period between 2013 and 2022, the goal has been met 90 percent of the time. The only year the drainage-wide goal was not met was in 2013, which was the last year that the State of Alaska managed the entire Kuskokwim River subsistence salmon fishery.

Interestingly, our staff at TCC and YRITFC has evaluated Chinook salmon escapement goal performance outside the TCC region to see how state management compares to the Yukon and Kuskokwim drainages. What we found is a disturbing pattern that I feel compelled to bring to your attention:

- In the 10-year period 2013–2022, the Copper River Chinook salmon escapement goal was met 60 percent of the time (not met in 2014, 2016, 2020, 2021). The State of Alaska lowered the goal beginning in 2021.
- In the 10-year period 2013–2022, Bristol Bay's Nushagak River Chinook salmon escapement goal was met 60 percent of the time (not met in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022).
- In the 10-year period 2013–2022, the Unalakleet's North River Chinook salmon escapement goal was met 40 percent of the time (not met in 2013, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Tanana Chiefs Conference urges this Committee to work with the Department of the Interior Bureaus to formalize a Federal-Tribal co-stewardship fisheries management partnership between the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (YRITFC), US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Bureau of Land Management, US National Park Service, and the US Geological Survey's Alaska Science Center.

Based upon the model of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, the conservation of wild Yukon River Chinook salmon and the tribal ways of life they support, not to mention the United State's treaty obligations to Canada would all benefit greatly from such a formalized fisheries management partnership that directly involves Yukon River Tribes and our extensive Indigenous Knowledge.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Chair Ulvi.  
Next, we turn to Mr. Dan Winkelman.

**STATEMENT OF DAN WINKELMAN, PRESIDENT/CEO, YUKON-KUSKOKWIM HEALTH CORPORATION**

Mr. WINKELMAN. Good afternoon, Vice Chairman Murkowski and members of the committee. I am Dan Winkelman. I am Deg Hit'an Athabascan Indian from Anchorage with family from McGrath and Shageluk, and a rural tribal member of the Shageluk Native Village. I am also the President and CEO of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on salmon today.

A healthy lifestyle begins at home, and for generations, families in this region have relied upon the return of salmon to subside throughout the year. This renewable natural resource has been vital to our health and culture. Since we have not had the fishing opportunities we used to, I am going to remind everyone today of what we have been missing from a nutrient perspective. It is not just negatively affecting our culture and well-being, but our good health. The health benefits of Alaska salmon are well-known. Alaska salmon is a complete high-quality protein as well as a key source of marine Omega-3 fatty acids, and is naturally high in many essential vitamins and minerals, including Vitamin D, selenium, and potassium.

Protein is known to promote satiety and stabilize blood sugars. It also helps provide lean body mass, and is necessary to make hormones and enzymes.

Omega-3 fatty acids lower triglycerides and increase levels of good cholesterol. Lower triglycerides and increased high-density lipoproteins can lead to decreased risk of death following a myocardial infarction, and reduce complications following other cardiovascular events. It can also decrease inflammation in the body and improve brain health.

Selenium is one of the most critical nutrients for maintaining and improving immune function, while potassium deficiency is of concern across the United States and can lead to increased hypertension, kidney stones, and poor bone health.

The health benefits of Alaska salmon are supported by scientific studies. Traditional diets in the YK region have incorporated salmon at higher rates than consumed in other parts of the Country. Studies conducted in the YK region have shown that people who consume moderate amounts of fish are less likely to develop some chronic diseases.

In addition, studies published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, not specific to the YK region, involving hundreds of thousands of participants eating modest amounts of fish, especially species higher in amounts of Omega-3 fatty acids such as our wild salmon eaten in the YK region, found that it reduces risk of coronary death by 36 percent and total mortality by 17 percent.

Accordingly, the USDA recommends a diet rich in vitamin D and Omega fatty acids, and current dietary guidelines from US Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA recommend that Americans increase their seafood intake to at least twice per week.

Until the recent salmon closures, the people of the YK region have easily met these recommendations with many people consuming salmon almost daily. A diet rich in nutrient dense foods like salmon, when compared to energy dense foods like pasta and other western shelf stable foods, translates to only needing a small portion of the food to reap the health benefits. Access to nutrient dense foods and consuming smaller portions helps to maintain healthy weight and decreases development of diet-related health conditions.

However, when fish is not available, meals are supplemented with store-bought, highly processed foods that contain added sug-

ars, salts, saturated fats, and often less protein. Diets become more energy dense instead of nutrient dense which can lead to an increase in unhealthy weight gain and increased rates of chronic disease development. Often, I have providers tell me that they see this has become a problem in the last decade or so here in the YK region.

Finally, when fish and other nutrient-dense seafoods are not accessible in the region, we are deprived of this culturally significant food that is well known to be the lifeblood of our region.

Significantly more scientific research monies need to be appropriated to determine why our salmon are not returning and how we can develop solutions to mitigate against this current salmon disaster we are living through, so our grandchildren do not have to live through it too. With these vital monies, the University of Alaska and Federal agencies like NOAA could become the experts needed for ending this crisis, or at least assist the Federal, State and tribal governments with developing science-based solutions so that we can rebuild our important salmon runs.

It is also time that while we continue the good work of restoring our wild salmon runs, we also debate in the region whether king and chum salmon hatcheries on both the upper Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers can provide more salmon fishing opportunities while we continue to rebuild our wild stocks. Hatcheries would not replace our wild runs, but would supplement and provide in a pinch while we continue to work and restore our stock, similar to the very successful State of Washington's programs for wild and hatchery management.

I have always found it strange that during times of severe fishing restrictions that only the subsistence users bear the largest burden for conservation, and that Alaska's two largest rivers do not have the large king and chum salmon hatcheries to supplement our decreasing wild stocks. This is even more inequitable when you see other areas around the State like Steward and Valdez with large hatcheries, silver salmon runs, that almost every year produce tens of thousands of salmon for sport fishers.

In conclusion, the recommendations that you hear today from myself and others will help to improve the availability of our salmon, our nutritious food for Alaska Natives whose health care status, despite years of significant progress, continues to lag behind other populations in Alaska and the rest of the United States.

Quyana, thank you for the time opportunity to provide testimony today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Winkelman follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAN WINKELMAN, PRESIDENT/CEO, YUKON-KUSKOKWIM  
HEALTH CORPORATION

Good afternoon Vice Chairman Murkowski and members of the committee. I am Dan Winkelman and the President and CEO of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on salmon.

YKHC is a tribal health organization of 58 federally-recognized Alaska Native tribes which was formed to administer a comprehensive health care delivery system for the communities of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. For more than fifty years, we have provided health care services to the people of the region under a Self-Governance Compact with the Indian Health Service under Title V of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.



YKHC serves a remote, isolated service area approximately the size of the State of Oregon. This region is the traditional home to Alaska's indigenous Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Athabascan people, and is not connected to the road system. As of the 2010 Census, 89 percent of the residents are Alaska Native, around half of the population speaks the Yup'ik or Cup'ik language at home, and most follow a subsistence lifestyle.

YKHC provides a wide variety of community, social, and population health services to all 30,000 residents of the region. Our health system includes 41 village clinics, 5 subregional clinics, a regional hospital, skilled nursing facility and other regional services and programs.

#### **A. Alaska Salmon Promotes Healthy People and Culture**

A healthy lifestyle begins at home, and for generations families in this region have relied upon the return of salmon to subsist throughout the year. This renewable natural resource has been vital to our health and our culture.

The health benefits of Alaska salmon are well known. Alaska salmon is a complete, high-quality protein, as well as a key source of marine Omega-3 fatty acids and is naturally high in many essential vitamins and minerals including vitamin D, selenium, and potassium.

Protein is known to promote satiety and stabilize blood sugar. It helps build lean body mass and is necessary to make hormones and enzymes. Omega 3 fatty acids lower triglycerides and increase levels of good cholesterol. Lower triglycerides and higher HDL can lead to decreased risk of death following a myocardial infarction and reduced complications following cardiovascular events. It can also decrease inflammation in the body and improve brain health. Selenium is one of the most crucial nutrients for maintaining and improving immune function; while potassium deficiency is a concern across the United States and can lead to hypertension, kidney stones, and poor bone health.

#### **B. Studies Support the Health Benefits of Salmon**

The health benefits of Alaska salmon are supported by scientific studies. Traditional diets in the YK region have incorporated salmon at higher rates than consumed in other parts of the country. Studies conducted in the YK region have shown that people who consume moderate amounts of fish are less likely to develop some chronic diseases.<sup>1</sup> In addition, studies not specific to the YK region involving hundreds of thousands of participants eating modest amounts fish, especially species higher in amounts of Omega 3 fatty acids such as the salmon eaten in the YK region, reduces risk of coronary death by 36 percent and total mortality by 17 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the USDA recommends a diet rich in vitamin D and Omega fatty acids, and current dietary guidelines from US Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA recommend that Americans increase their seafood intake to twice per week.

#### **C. Lack of Salmon Negatively Impacts Our Health and Culture**

Historically, the people of the YK region have easily met the recommendations above with many people consuming salmon almost daily, until recent salmon closures. A diet rich in nutrient dense foods compared to energy dense foods, translates to only needing a small portion of the food to reap the benefits. Access to nutrient dense foods and consuming smaller portions helps to maintain healthy weight and decreases development of diet-related health conditions.

However, when fish is not available, meals are supplemented with store-bought, highly processed foods that contain added sugars, salts, saturated fats, and often less protein. Diets become more energy dense instead of nutrient dense which can lead to an increase in unhealthy weight gain and increased rates of chronic disease development. Finally, when fish and other nutrient-dense seafoods are not accessible in the region, we are deprived of this culturally significant food that is well known to be the lifeblood of the region.

#### **D. Appropriate Funds for Scientific Research**

Significantly more scientific research monies need to be appropriated to determine why our salmon are not returning and how we can develop solutions to mitigate

<sup>1</sup>Makhoul Z, Kristal AR, Gulati R, et al. Associations of very high intakes of eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids with biomarkers of chronic disease risk among Yup'ik Eskimos. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2010;91(3):777–785. doi:10.3945/ajcn.2009.28820

<sup>2</sup>Mozaffarian D, Rimm EB. Fish intake, contaminants, and human health: evaluating the risks and the benefits. *JAMA.* 2006 Oct 18;296(15):1885–99. doi: 10.1001/jama.296.15.1885. Erratum in: *JAMA.* 2007 Feb 14;297(6):590. PMID: 17047219.

against this current salmon disaster we are living through so our grandchildren do not have to live through it too. With these vital monies, the University of Alaska could become the experts needed for ending this crisis, or at least assist the federal, state and tribal governments with developing science-based solutions so that we can rebuild our important salmon runs.

The recommendations that you hear today will help to improve the availability of our salmon, our nutritious food for Alaska Natives whose health care status, despite years of significant progress, continues to lag behind other populations in Alaska and the rest of the United States.

Quyana for the opportunity and honor to provide testimony today.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Winkelman.

Next, we turn to Ms. Nicole Borromeo, Executive Vice President, AFN.

**STATEMENT OF NICOLE BORROMEIO, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES; ACCOMPANIED BY BEN MALLOTT, VICE PRESIDENT, EXTERNAL RELATIONS**

Ms. BORROMEIO. Quyana, Chair Murkowski, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nicole Borromeo and I serve as the Executive Vice President and General Counsel for the Alaska Federation of Natives. I am joined today by AFN's Vice President of External Relations, Ben Mallott.

AFN was established in 1966 to achieve a fair and just settlement of our aboriginal land claims. We remain the largest statewide Native membership organization in Alaska, 179 tribes, 154 for-profit village Native corporations, 9 for-profit regional corporations, and 10 regional nonprofit tribal consortia that contract and compact to administer Federal programs under the Indian Self-Determination Act, our current members.

On behalf of AFN, I would like to provide testimony regarding a matter of the utmost importance to Alaska Native people, and that is protecting our ways of life, which everyone in this room knows is centered on subsistence. Fish is not just about food. Although fish sustains our people across multiple generations and multiple regions in nearly every village and community of the State, it also sustains our cultural practices and traditions, which includes passing those traditions on to the next generation.

This fish crisis has the potential to erode those cultural practices and what is most important to us, our families, and our community relationships. The fish crisis is also negatively affecting our relationship with the Federal and State governments. This is a complex challenge that requires a bold new consensus. It requires realigning Federal and State laws and policies and also requires the State and the Federal government and Alaska Native entities, including those regions that rely heavily on commercial fishing, to work together in true partnership.

The State's most recent decision to challenge the Katie John rulings and the rural subsistence priority of ANILCA in Title VIII is wrong. U.S. v. Alaska, a case now in Federal court, will determine the future of Katie John and whether or not the rural subsistence priority continues.

However, this is just the latest round of the conflict between State and Federal subsistence management. This threat comes at

a time when the critical need for a rural subsistence priority due to the shortage of fish is greater than ever.

Climate change and international tensions in the Arctic around fisheries also threaten our way of life. ANSCA and ANILCA were both bargains between the Federal Government, State of Alaska, and the Alaska Native communities, all 12 regions. Those laws must be honored, particularly in light of the fish crisis and recent attacks on our subsistence way of life by the State. Alaska natives are going to look for protections in Federal law and ways to strengthen Federal law.

AFN resolution 2301, adopted at this year's annual convention, calls on the Biden Administration and the U.S. Congress to do everything in their power to protect our subsistence way of life, including amending ANSCA to reinstate terminated aboriginal hunting and fishing rights and amending ANILCA to strengthen our Title VIII protections.

Congress should support and invest in Alaska Native peoples to increase our capacity to protect our interests in the lands and waters, and to be fully engaged in cooperative relationships and dialogue as opposed to litigation, which the State is pursuing. These situations require alignment and working together.

Senator Murkowski, please continue to lead Alaska to achieving this bold new consensus. AFN will stand with you and we will provide whatever help is needed. Our people cannot be confined to conflicts of the past. This is a new day. Our subsistence way of life must have unconditional Federal support, and the State of Alaska must show willingness to seek a different path forward other than litigation.

Quyana very much for your attention and your commitment. We know you traveled a long way in a record snowstorm. We know you are committed to helping us protect our way of life.

I welcome the opportunity to answer questions later.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Borrromeo follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF NICOLE BORROME, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, ALASKA  
FEDERATION OF NATIVES

## I. Introduction

Thank you, Vice-Chair Murkowski, for inviting me to testify today on "*The Impact of the Historic Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities Along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers.*" My name is Nicole Borrromeo, and I am the Executive Vice- President and General Counsel of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN).<sup>1</sup>

AFN is the oldest and largest statewide Native membership organization in Alaska. Our membership includes 179 Alaska Native tribes, 154 for-profit village Native corporations and 9 for-profit regional Native corporations established pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and 10 regional nonprofit tribal non-profits or consortia that contract and compact to administer federal programs under the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act. The mission of AFN is to enhance and advance the cultural, economic, and political voice of the

<sup>1</sup> Shareholder of Doyon, Limited, the ANCSA regional corporation for Interior Alaska, and the Board Chairman for MTNT, Ltd., the ANCSA village corporation representing four Interior Alaska villages. Member of the Alaska Redistricting Board; the U.S. Census Bureau's National Advisory Committee on Race, Ethnicity, and Other Populations; and the U.S. Department of Energy's Indian Country Energy and Infrastructure Workgroup. Founding Board Member of Justice Not Politics Alaska, a nonpartisan organization promoting the independence of Alaska's judiciary. Mentor in the Color of Justice Program. J.D., University of Washington; B.A., the University of Alaska-Anchorage. I reside in Anchorage with my husband and our four children.

Alaska Native community on matters of mutual concern, including subsistence hunting and fishing, which is the foundation of Alaska Native ways of life.

Today, I want to provide testimony regarding a matter of utmost importance for Alaska Native people: subsistence and protecting our ways of life. The challenge of the fish crisis is a complex issue that requires a bold new consensus, with the federal and state government working closely with the Alaska Native community. Instead of working toward such a consensus, the State is currently pursuing another unnecessary round of litigation through *U.S. v Alaska*. AFN has intervened in the suit on behalf of the entire Alaska Native community. We are in a different place after surviving the pandemic and we want to spend our time and resources building a bright new future where Alaska Natives thrive and our ways of life are flourishing—not relitigating old battles that, at best, maintain the status quo or, at worst, result in a further erosion of our fishing (and hunting) rights.

AFN therefore calls for a bold new consensus that realigns federal and state laws and policies to build on the existing capabilities of the Alaska Native community and does not hold us down—or try to conquer, divide, or ignore us. The consensus must be based on trust, shared information, and an agreed upon pathway to accomplish our collective goals. Shared information and knowledge must include clear data about the warming of the waters, the movement of fish stocks, increased competition, and conflict. Changes must be made to ANCSA and Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) to give us the solid foundation we need to be fully contributing members of the larger society. We do not want half measures; we want full capabilities under the law to protect our ways of life.

Senator Murkowski, you will be called on to lead Alaskans in achieving this bold new consensus. We will stand with you and provide whatever help is needed. We cannot be stuck in the conflicts of the past. It is a new day. Our subsistence way of life must have unconditional federal support. And the State of Alaska must show the willingness to sit down and talk and seek a different path forward.

## II. Summary: Our People and Fish

AFN was formed in 1966 to protect Alaska Native ownership and use, primarily for subsistence purposes, of our lands. For the first five years, AFN focused exclusively on obtaining a fair and just land settlement with the U.S. Congress. Alaska is the traditional homeland for Alaska Native peoples. As such, we claimed traditional use and occupancy over the majority of the entire state to, among other things, meet the subsistence needs of our people. Subsistence was, and remains, the core aspect of our cultures and people’s way of life for over 12,000 years.

*U.S. v. Alaska*,<sup>2</sup> a case now in federal court that will determine the future of the *Katie John* cases and the rural subsistence priority, is just the latest iteration of the conflict between State and federal subsistence management. This threat comes at a time when the critical need for the rural subsistence priority, due to the shortage of fish, is greater than ever.

Alaska Native peoples have lived and thrived on these lands and managed subsistence resources long before the United States or the State of Alaska existed. Despite this, in recent decades the Alaska Native community has repeatedly been caught between those two entities and forced to fight to ensure the continuation of our ways of life. Those struggles highlight why self-determination matters—we want to be the drivers of our own future. And as part of those efforts, we want to strengthen federal, State, and tribal relationships. Recent Supreme Court decisions, including *Haaland v. Brackeen*, have affirmed the federal trust responsibility. Alaska Native people are not a service population, but a trusted partner and federal policies should reflect that. Funding and other resources are needed to strengthen and scale up those relationships.

AFN is proud of the hard work and resilience of our people who live off the land and waters. Continuing this way of life takes deep knowledge of the land, the animals, and the fish, which give themselves to us to nourish our families and communities. This way of living requires traditional knowledge passed on from generation to generation. It requires getting up every day and doing the hard work. This is something we have in common with Indigenous people across the Arctic, in Canada, Greenland, and Russia. For the United States to have credibility in the Arctic, the federal relationship with Alaska Natives must matter and be strong.

In our view, the preeminent challenge before us is fish—the warming of the waters, the movement of fish stocks, the increased competition, and resulting conflicts. It will define our future and that of our country. Fish is not just about food, although fish sustains our people across multiple generations, in nearly every village and community in the State. It is about sustaining our cultural practices and

<sup>2</sup>No. 22-cv-54 (SLG) (D. Alaska).

traditions, which includes passing those traditions on to our next generation. The fish crisis has caused unsettling change and has the potential to rip apart our cultural practices and what is most important to us: our family and community relationships. The fish crisis also threatens our relationships with the federal and State governments.

Instead of focusing all efforts on devising solutions to the fish crisis, the federal and State governments are at a continued state of impasse over jurisdictional issues, threatening our inherent rights to hunt and fish and our subsistence priority in federal law, which allows Alaska Native villages to feed our families in times of shortage. AFN urges the U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee to do everything in their power to stop this conflict. The State of Alaska is wrong to challenge *Katie John* and the rural subsistence priority. This Committee must stand with the Alaska Native people and protect *Katie John* and Title VIII of ANILCA. The real impacts of the fish crisis require our best efforts in science-based research, domain awareness of what is happening with the warming of the waters, movement of fish stocks, increased competition including from international sources, and conflict, and proactive resourcing of efforts to mitigate and adapt to these challenges.

### III. Background and Briefing

#### A. ANCSA and ANILCA

As noted above, AFN was initially established in 1966 around the issue of Alaska Native land claims, which, for Native peoples, was of utmost importance because large amounts of land are necessary to be able to continue the traditional subsistence practices that sustain Native ways of life. A Federal Field Committee report, which became the basis for the land settlement legislation, had three important conclusions: Alaska Native peoples and our land-based cultures (i) are very different from other Alaskans and Americans, (ii) covered nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the entire State of Alaska, and (iii) subsistence activities require over 60 million acres of land.<sup>3</sup> To that end, AFN devoted significant efforts from 1966 to 1971 towards securing a fair and just land settlement; protection of traditional culture practices and the ability to continue the Alaska Native subsistence way of life was central to those negotiations. Those efforts resulted in the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

In enacting ANCSA, Congress made clear that it “expected both the Secretary [of the Interior] and the State to take any action necessary to protect the subsistence needs of [Alaska] Natives.”<sup>4</sup> The Alaska Native community believed that Congress’ plain expectation that the State of Alaska and the federal government would do everything in their power to protect Alaska Natives’ ability to continue hunting, fishing, and gathering on their own land and the public domain would be fulfilled. Unfortunately, that promise was not kept, and Congress sought to remedy that issue and protect Alaska Native subsistence in 1980 when it enacted VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation.

Title VIII of ANILCA gives a user priority to customary and traditional subsistence uses by rural residents on federal public lands (and waters) in times of shortage.<sup>5</sup> Notably, “[e]arly drafts of Title VIII protected only subsistence uses by [Alaska Natives]. When the State advised Congress that the Alaska Constitution might bar the enforcement of a preference extended only to Natives, Congress broadened the preference to include all ‘rural residents’” at the State’s behest.<sup>6</sup>

Although the subsistence priority was expanded to include all rural residents, the economic and cultural survival of Alaska Natives was the principal reason why Congress enacted Title VIII. Representative Morris Udall “lodged a detailed discussion of the pending [final] bill in the Congressional Record,” in which he noted Title VIII’s

[M]anagement provisions which recognize the responsibility of the Federal government to protect the opportunity from generation to generation for the continuation of subsistence uses by the Alaska Native people so that Alaska Natives now engaged in subsistence uses, their descendants, and their descendants’ descendants, will have the opportunity to determine for themselves their

<sup>3</sup>Federal Field Committee for the Development and Planning in Alaska, *Alaska Natives and the Land* (1968).

<sup>4</sup>See H. Conf. Rep. No. 92–746, at 37 (1971), as reprinted in 1971 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2247, 2250 (Conference Committee Report).

<sup>5</sup>16 U.S.C. §§ 3111–3126 (Title VIII), § 3114 (rural subsistence priority).

<sup>6</sup>*Kenaitze Indian Tribe v. Alaska*, 860 F.2d 312, 313 n.1 (9th Cir. 1988).

own cultural orientation and the rate and degree of evolution, if any, of their Alaska Native culture.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, Congress also included in ANILCA's Title VIII an offer to the State: the option of managing subsistence on federal public lands—in addition to the authority it already had over State and private (mostly ANC) lands—if the State enacted a law of general applicability containing the same rural subsistence priority.<sup>8</sup> The ability to manage a unified statewide system was, and remains, the State's incentive to comply with Title VIII's provisions.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of fish in the context of Alaska Native subsistence. For many Alaska Native peoples living in rural villages, preserving their ways of life and ensuring their food security depends on their ability to subsistence fish. Fish is more than just a food source—its part of our culture and identity. When subsistence resources are taken away—as has happened in the past under State jurisdiction<sup>9</sup> or in man-made disasters such as the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989—the result is economic and cultural catastrophe for the families who rely on those resources.

#### *B. The Importance of Subsistence to Alaska Native Peoples*

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) research shows that subsistence food harvest by Alaska residents represents less than one percent of the fish harvested annually in Alaska.<sup>10</sup> Commercial fisheries account for about 98.6 percent of the statewide harvest.<sup>11</sup>

ADF&G research also shows that 95 percent of households in rural Alaska consume subsistence-caught fish.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, ADF&G's 2020 subsistence harvest report calculated that subsistence fisheries provide 56.8 percent of the wild foods harvested by rural Native villages for subsistence purposes, with salmon comprising the largest portion of the total harvest at 32.3 percent.<sup>13</sup> Subsistence harvests provide 25 percent of the caloric requirements of rural populations in Alaska.<sup>14</sup> Harvests range by area, however, with people living in the most remote, roadless regions that often have no access to affordable groceries harvesting approximately 300–400 pounds per person each year and rural southcentral communities, which are generally on the road system, harvesting 145 pounds per person.<sup>15</sup> And while the Alaska Native population makes up a substantial portion, i.e., approximately 55 percent of the population of all rural areas in the state,<sup>16</sup> in the most remote, roadless regions, the Alaska Native population comprises a much larger majority: 82 percent.<sup>17</sup> Subsistence, and fish in particular, feeds many of those communities. Most rural Native village economies are made up of a combination of cash and subsistence, with extremely limited sources of cash income. Subsistence harvest and use (for personal

<sup>7</sup> 126 CONG. REC. 29, 278 (Nov. 12, 1980) (extended remarks of Rep. Morris Udall).

<sup>8</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 3115(d).

<sup>9</sup> For example, after the Northwest Arctic Caribou Herd crashed in 1976, urban sport hunters sued to reverse a decision allocating the limited caribou for Native villages' subsistence practices. This resulted in the State having to fly store-bought foods to Native villages. *Id.* In 1978, the State arrested several Alaska Native elders for operating traditional subsistence fishwheels on the Upper Tanana River during a period the State Board of Fish reserved exclusively for sport dip-netting. *See* Alaska Fed'n of Natives, *THE RIGHT TO SUBSIST: FEDERAL PROTECTION OF SUBSISTENCE IN ALASKA* 6 (2010).

<sup>10</sup> *Subsistence in Alaska: A Year 2017 Update 2*, Division of Subsistence, ADF&G [https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/subsistence\\_update\\_2017.pdf](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/subsistence_update_2017.pdf). Subsistence food harvest (fish and game) represent about 0.9 percent, personal use fishing and hunting represent about 0.2 percent. *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> The ADF&G Division of Subsistence, *Alaska's Economies and Subsistence*, [https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/subsistence/ak\\_economies\\_subsistence.pdf](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/subsistence/ak_economies_subsistence.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *Food Production and Nutritional Values of Noncommercial Fish and Wildlife Harvests in Alaska*, ADF&G Division of Subsistence (2019) [https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/Wild\\_Harvest\\_Notebook.pdf](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/Wild_Harvest_Notebook.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Subsistence in Alaska: A Year 2017 Update 3*, Division of Subsistence, ADF&G [https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/subsistence\\_update\\_2017.pdf](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/subsistence/pdfs/subsistence_update_2017.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>16</sup> James A. Fall, *Alaska Population Trends and Patterns, 1960–2018* at 11, ADF&G Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (2019) [https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/subsistence/Trends\\_in\\_Population\\_Summary\\_2019.pdf](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/subsistence/Trends_in_Population_Summary_2019.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Alaska Native Population, Alaska Native Policy Center, <https://firstalaskans.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/ANPCa3.pdf>; see also U.S. Census Bureau, Percent American Indian and Alaska Native Alone or in Combination, Total Population by County: 2020, <https://public.tableau.com/shared/NMZXR84J?:showVizHome=n> (showing the Alaska Native population makes up 96.9 percent of the Kusilvak Census Area, 88.5 percent of the Bethel Census Area, 88.1 percent of the Northwest Arctic Borough, 82.6 percent of the Nome Census Area, 79.9 percent of the Dillingham Census Area, and 77.2 percent of the Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area).

and group consumption) is an integral part of community relationships. The cost to replace wild food harvests (both fish and game) in rural Alaska is estimated to be about \$170–\$340 million annually, or about \$97–\$193 million to just replace the 56.8 percent comprised of fish. When subsistence resources (or the legal right to harvest them) are taken away, they cannot be replaced by substitutes.<sup>18</sup>

*\*ERR14\*C. AFN Resolution 23–01*

Each year at the Annual AFN Convention, delegates submit and pass resolutions to set the goals and priorities of the organization. The resolutions voted on and passed by the delegates and membership guide AFN’s advocacy priorities and work on subsistence, health and wellness, public safety, education, land, and natural resources, economic development, and selfdetermination. AFN resolutions record the aspirations, priorities, and vision of the Alaska Native community.

Resolution 23–01 is an AFN Board-sponsored resolution adopted at the AFN Convention on October 21, 2023. Resolution 23–01 recognizes the multi-decade fight to protect Alaska Native subsistence, which our people rely on to sustain our traditional ways of life and to ensure our food security.

Resolution 23–01 calls on the federal government to do several things:

1. For the Department of Interior and DOJ to aggressively protect Alaska Native hunting and fishing rights in court
2. For the White House and Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to use their full authority to protect Alaska Native subsistence users
3. For Congress to repeal the section of ANCSA that terminates Alaska Native aboriginal hunting and fishing rights and replace that section with an affirmation of those inherent rights; and
4. For Congress to revisit and strengthen Title VIII of ANILCA to permanently protect the right of Alaska Native people to engage in subsistence fishing and hunting in Alaska’s navigable waters and to adequately fund those efforts.

AFN’s members strongly supported Resolution 23–01 and it passed easily at the Convention, with a few minor amendments from delegates that strengthened the resolution’s wording. The resolution reflects how important protecting the subsistence way of life is to our people. AFN is calling on the executive and legislative branches of the federal government to do everything in their power to ensure Alaska Native subsistence is protected and strengthened. A copy of Resolution 23–01 is attached to this testimony for your reference.\*

*D. Threats to Subsistence*

a. Climate change

The Arctic Council has affirmed that the Arctic is warming three times faster than the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup> Climate change has many effects on Alaska’s people, including damaging and changing ecosystems and altering the distribution of marine living resources. Climate change, including marine heatwaves, are expected to increasingly have significant impacts on the availability of fish. Those changes, in turn, threaten the traditional lifestyles of Alaska Native communities. Changing fish migration patterns, combined with the high cost of non-subsistence foods, are exacerbating food insecurity and making traditional subsistence lifestyles more difficult.

b. The State’s efforts to undermine Alaska Native subsistence

ANILCA’s Title VIII offers the State of Alaska the option of managing subsistence on federal public lands if the State enacts a law of general applicability containing a rural subsistence priority. Unfortunately, in 1989 the Alaska Supreme Court held in *McDowell v. State of Alaska* that the Alaska State Constitution does not allow for a rural subsistence priority.<sup>20</sup> As a result of *McDowell*, the State’s ability to take over subsistence management on federal lands via implementation of a rural preference pursuant to Title VIII is contingent upon amending the Alaska Constitution.

Instead of concentrating its efforts on amending the Alaska Constitution to allow a rural subsistence priority, which AFN would assist with, the State is instead doing everything in its power to undermine federal Title VIII authority and the

<sup>18</sup> See *Food Production and Nutritional Values of Noncommercial Fish and Wildlife Harvests in Alaska* at 3–4.

\* The information referred to has been retained in the Committee files.

<sup>19</sup> National Strategy for the Arctic Region 5 (2022).

<sup>20</sup> 785 P.2d 1, 9 Alaska 1989 (holding that the rural user priority for subsistence hunting and fishing was unconstitutional under sections 3, 15, and 17 of article VIII of the Alaska Constitution).

rural subsistence priority. For example, in *U.S. v. Alaska*,<sup>21</sup> a case now proceeding before the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska, the State of Alaska recently outright challenged the validity of the *Katie John* cases and therefore the rural subsistence fishing priority provided by Title VIII of ANILCA. If the court overturns *Katie John*, there will no longer be a rural subsistence priority and management of all subsistence fisheries will be in the hands of the State. Moreover, subsistence fishing will be open to all Alaskans even during times of shortage.

The State's forward attack on our ways of life poses a significant threat. The State's "all Alaskans" policy already threatens the food security and continued ways of life of Alaska Native people living in rural communities. If that policy was also extended to federal lands and waters within those lands, the continued existence of our people living in rural villages will be further jeopardized. State management also presents other difficulties; for example, the State has enacted laws creating non-subsistence use areas where subsistence is not allowed. Within these non-subsistence use areas are Native villages on the Kenai Borough and other areas. The State's non-subsistence use areas prioritize commercial fishing and make it impossible for Alaska Native people living in those areas to carry out their traditional subsistence practices.

#### c. International pressures on marine fisheries

Internal pressures on struggling Arctic fisheries also present a significant threat to subsistence. Both Russia and China increasingly seek to influence the Arctic, including fisheries. Chinese and Russian dual flagged fishing ships and China's desire to control 90 percent plus of the fish protein in the world to feed its own population are both situations that we are monitoring with concern.

### E. Proposed Solutions

#### a. Legislation

As called for in AFN Resolution 23–01, Congress should repeal 42 U.S.C. 1603(b), the section of ANCSA that terminates Alaska Native aboriginal hunting and fishing rights. Congress should replace that section with an affirmation of those inherent rights. Congress should also revisit and strengthen Title VIII of ANILCA to permanently protect the right of Alaska Native people to engage in subsistence fishing and hunting in Alaska's navigable waters and to adequately fund those efforts.

#### b. Customary Trade Agreements

ANILCA's definition of "subsistence uses" includes "the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for . . . customary trade. . . ." <sup>22</sup> By federal regulation, "customary trade" is defined as "exchange for cash of fish and wildlife resources . . . not otherwise prohibited by Federal law or regulation, to support personal and family needs; and does not include trade which constitutes a significant commercial enterprise." <sup>23</sup>

An Indigenous Free Trade Agreement for the Arctic to allow for customary trade among Native people across the Arctic and Alaska presents a unique opportunity. Such an agreement would push the customary trade provision further than ever before, allowing Alaska Native people to provide for our own food security.

#### c. Increasing federal/tribal dialogue and sharing of research

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other federal agencies can and should do better when it comes to conducting and sharing research with Alaska Native peoples regarding warming oceans and movement of fish stocks. It is imperative to share this data with Alaska Native peoples—we must have this information to further our understanding and develop systems for adaptation. We know things will not stay the same and in order to improve resilience, we must have up-to-date data and information.

#### d. Funding

Funding co-management and strategic tribal/federal partnerships is also of the utmost importance. Existing co-management relationships and programs, including pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act are severely underfunded and understaffed. Agencies should focus on improving current co-management relationships and programs and increasing funding for them.

Alaska Natives need a seat at the table to manage fish and game resources that we depend upon for sustenance and to practice our rich and diverse cultures. Al-

<sup>21</sup>No. 22-cv-54 (SLG) (D. Alaska).

<sup>22</sup>16 U.S.C. § 3113.

<sup>23</sup>50 C.F.R. § 100.4.



though we have traditional knowledge of resource management that goes back centuries, we need to build capacity in order to continue and grow more co-management projects. There is a crucial need for targeted funding to enhance the skills and abilities that will allow us to achieve measurable and sustainable results.

There is also a need to educate our young people on western ideas of resource management so that they can bridge the gap with traditional ways of management and use the best practices and knowledge of both styles. Funding for programs that train Alaska Natives on the job and for scholarships to study resource management at universities would be a huge boost to comanagement projects statewide.

e. Federal Subsistence Board recommendations—identified but no implemented

Federal subsistence management also has room for improvement: we have offered many recommendations in the past to improve the Federal Subsistence Board (FSB). Attached by reference is a letter from AFN to U.S. Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar dated January 7, 2009 and a supplemental letter dated January 21, 2010.\* U.S. Secretary Ken Salazar had the Department of Interior undertake an exhausted review of the FSB. Over 200 hours of hearing and meetings were held to gather input. Unfortunately, only two improvements have been implemented so far—the addition of two new rural seats.

f. *U.S. v. Alaska*

The U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee should file an amicus curiae brief in *U.S. v. Alaska*, standing with Alaska Native people. The Committee should invite the Governor of Alaska to testify and outline in detail his efforts to work with Alaska Native people and engage in constructive dialogue. The Committee should encourage dialogue and respond to the urgent requests of the Alaska Native people.

g. Compacting

The U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee should use tools our government uses when they want to match up goals and accountability: compacting. The Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) in Bethel would like to be able to demonstrate the potential of a domestic version of the Millennium Challenge Compact, which the United States uses with middle- and low-income countries to accomplish goals. The five-year commitment of resources in the compact, which is negotiated, with an option to renew for another five years, is ideal to advance as a first step.

Internationally, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is a resounding success and has a demonstrated history. Domestically, in the United States, we have found compacting in health care, Bureau of Indian Affairs services, and even in state programs with child welfare and the new pilots in compacting in education which is just beginning. This modern tool should take the place of year-to-year grants, or competitive grants and become a floor for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Authorization for a pilot would greatly help match up our country's goals in the fish crisis with the multi-faceted approaches needed to move ahead. The Committee would find the leadership of AVCP very willing to sit down and negotiate goals and assume responsibility and accountability.

**IV. Conclusion**

Thank you again for inviting AFN to testify as part of today's hearing on "*The Impact of the Historic Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities Along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers.*" We are happy to supplement our written testimony if requested. In sum, the protection of subsistence ways of life was of top priority for Alaska Natives when both ANCSA and ANILCA were enacted. Congress recognized this too. Alaska Native peoples now look to the federal government to uphold its side of the bargain and protect Alaska Native subsistence and ways of life. The State is currently unwilling, and its "all Alaskans" approach is unworkable for the Alaska Native community. Protecting our subsistence way of life through maximum self-determination is critically important to Alaska Natives, particularly as Native peoples cope with climate change and continued marginalization by the federal and state governments. But AFN and the Alaska Native people will keep pushing and will be here if the State changes its mind and wants to work with us. We hope for a day when the fight is not one to maintain the status quo.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Qu yana, thank you.

We next turn to Tisha Neviq'aq Kuhns, who is the Vice President of Land and Natural Resources at Calista.

\*The information referred to has been retained in the Committee files.

**STATEMENT OF TISHA NEVIQ'AQ KUHN, VICE PRESIDENT OF  
LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CALISTA CORPORATION**

Ms. KUHN. Thank you, Vice Chair Murkowski and members of the committee. Thank you for convening this field hearing on the massive decline of Arctic Yukon and Kuskokwim salmon.

My name is Tisha Neviq'aq Kuhns, and I am from here, Bethel, Alaska and currently live in Anchorage. My parents are Carlton and Lucy Kuhns, and my grandfather was the late Chief Joe Lomack of Akiachak. I am a tribal member of Akiachak Native Community and a Calista shareholder.

I currently serve as Vice President of Land and Natural Resources for Calista. Calista is the regional Alaska Native Corporation created by the ANSCA of 1971 to resolve the land claims of the indigenous people of the YK Region. We have nearly 37,000 shareholders. About 20,000 shareholders live in the region.

One of our most important traditional values is to share fish with our elders and with others who are physically unable to provide for themselves. Our elders tell us that when we share our catch, we would be fruitful in the years to come and blessed with more fish.

Instead, we are experiencing a historic salmon crash. Alaska Natives have borne the brunt of the conservation burden; conservation burdens must also be shared equitably.

Our elders also taught us that the traditional economies of hunting, fishing, and gathering are our inherent rights as Alaska Natives. Our elders, who either did not understand or were not proficient in the English language, taught us that the State and Federal governments cannot legislate over our right to procure food to avert hunger, they cannot legislate over our cultures.

The status quo cannot continue, and the fix must start with revising ANCSA to restore Alaska Native traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. With the expectation in ANCSA's legislative history that Alaska Native hunting and fishing rights would be upheld by any action necessary, Section 4(b) of ANCSA, which has been interpreted as extinguishing "any aboriginal hunting and fishing rights that may exist" in Alaska, must be revised.

Congress later tried to remedy this injustice with ANILCA. However, ANILCA's initial Alaska Native subsistence priority was changed in the eleventh hour to a rural subsistence priority. This leaves urban Alaska Natives with no protections. Even the inadequate compromise for a rural subsistence preference was soon thereafter held to conflict with Alaska's constitution.

So the responsibility for administering the rural preference transferred to the Federal Government and the protected areas shrank from all Alaska to only Federal lands. This checkerboard of conflicting State and Federal management systems largely fails to protect Alaska Native subsistence rights and has wounded Alaska Natives for decades.

Congress's protections of Alaska Native access to marine mammals, migratory birds, and halibut in offshore waters are beneficial, but are too limited. Congress's failure to amend ANCSA to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights is a violation of the Federal Trust responsibility.

Congress expected that the State and the Secretary of Interior would take any action necessary to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights, and over 50 years later it must be apparent that Congress cannot neglect its responsibility any longer. Studies are useful, opportunities like this to speak before this Committee are much appreciated, but what we need now is action.

Too often events like this hearing today are only held to appease and quiet the Native peoples. Calista urges the Congress to take up a bill to revise ANCSA Section 4(b) to restore Alaska Native subsistence rights. We need real action following this hearing to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights.

Quyana for your time, and thank you to YKHC for hosting and the inter-tribes for inviting us to have this hearing today. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kuhns follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TISHA NEVIQ'AQ KUHNS, VICE PRESIDENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CALISTA CORPORATION

Chairman Schatz, Ranking Member Murkowski, and Members of the Committee, thank you for convening this field hearing on the massive decline of Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim salmon.

My name is Tisha Neviq'aq Kuhns, and I am from Bethel, Alaska and currently live in Anchorage. My parents are Carlton and Lucy Kuhns, and my grandfather was the late Chief Joe Lomack of Akiachak. I am a Tribal Citizen of Akiachak Native Community and a Calista Shareholder.

I currently serve as Vice President of Land and Natural Resources for Calista. Calista is the regional Alaska Native Corporation created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 to resolve the land claims of the Indigenous people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region. We have nearly 37,000 Alaska Native Shareholders, with approximately 20,000 Shareholders remaining on our ancestral Homelands in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region.

One of the most important Traditional values is to share fish with our Elders and others who are physically unable to provide for themselves. Our Elders tell us that when we shared our catch, we would be fruitful in the years to come and blessed with more fish. Instead, we are experiencing a historic salmon crash. Alaska Natives have borne the brunt of the conservation burden; conservation burdens must also be shared equitably. Our Elders also taught us that the Traditional economies of hunting, fishing, and gathering are our inherent rights as Alaska Natives. Our Elders, including many who either did not understand or were not proficient in the English language, taught us that the state and federal governments cannot legislate over our right to procure food to avert hunger, they cannot legislate over our cultures.

The status quo cannot continue, and the fix must start with revising ANCSA to restore Alaska Native Traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. With the expectation in ANCSA's legislative history that Alaska Native hunting and fishing rights would be upheld by any action necessary, Section 4(b) of ANCSA extinguished "any aboriginal hunting and fishing rights that may exist" in Alaska.

Congress later tried to remedy this outright robbery of our right to procure food security with ANILCA. However, ANILCA's initial Alaska Native subsistence priority was changed in the eleventh hour to a rural subsistence priority. This leaves urban Alaska Natives with no protections. Even the rural subsistence preference conflicts with Alaska's constitution so it can only be administered on federal lands and a broken dual-management system emerged. This checkerboard of conflicting state and federal management systems largely fails to protect Alaska Native subsistence rights and has wounded Alaska Natives for decades. Congress's protections of Alaska Native access to marine mammals, migratory birds, and halibut in offshore waters are beneficial, but are too limited. Congress's failure to amend ANCSA to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights is a violation of the Federal Trust responsibility.

Congress expected that the state and the Secretary of Interior would take any action necessary to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights and over 50 years later it must be apparent that Congress cannot neglect its responsibility any longer. Studies are useful, opportunities like this to speak before this Committee are much ap-

preciated, but what we need now is action. Too often events like this hearing today are only held to appease and quiet the Native peoples. Calista urges the Congress to take up a bill to revise ANCSA § 4(b) to restore Alaska Native subsistence rights. We need real action following this hearing to uphold Alaska Native subsistence rights.

#### **Attachment**

#### AMENDING SECTION 14(C)(3) OF THE ALASKA NATIVE CLAIMS SETTLEMENT ACT—OCTOBER 2023

**What is Section 14(c)(3) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement (ANCSA)?** Section 14(c)(3) of ANCSA required every Native Village Corporation to turn a portion of the lands it received under the Act over to the State of Alaska to be held in trust for the eventual creation of a municipal government in the Village. 43 U.S. Code § 1613(c)(3).

**Why does Section 14(c)(3) need to be amended?** Since ANCSA’s passage fifty years ago, ANCSA’s vision of established municipal governments in every Village has failed to materialize. There are a number of Village sites, where conveyances to the State Municipal Land Trust (MLT) have not yet taken place or have not been finalized with a signed 14(c)(3) agreement. In the case of many rural Villages, the land is still being managed in apparent perpetuity by the State MLT, an office that is underfunded and overtasked. The State of Alaska does not have the resources to adequately manage these lands indefinitely, nor did the drafters of ANCSA intend that result.

**S. 2615—Alaska Native Village Municipal Lands Restoration Act of 2023.** Introduced by Senators Murkowski and Sullivan, S. 2615 seeks to address the failure of 14(c)(3). The bill permits Village Corporations to regain their lands in instances where municipal corporations have not been established.

**Proposed Section 3 Amendment to S. 2615.** A further amendment to S. 2615 is being requested, specifically applicable to Village Corporations and Tribes located within the Calista Region. Under the proposed amendment:

- A Village Corporation that re-acquires lands pursuant to Section 2 of the bill (S. 2615) is permitted to transfer such lands, either by sale or gift, to the federally-recognized Tribe located nearby. This transfer is conditioned upon the approval of the regional Alaska Native corporation that owns the subsurface rights to these lands.
- Thereafter, at the option of the Tribe, the Tribe may transfer such lands to the Secretary of the Interior to be recognized as Indian Country, as defined by 25 U.S.C. 1151, under the jurisdiction of the Tribe (in restricted fee status or held in trust by the United States for benefit of the Tribe).

**Conclusion.** The ANCSA’s unfulfilled promise of establishing municipal corporations in every Village underscores the urgent need to return the lands to Village Corporations or the Villages themselves. The Calista Region has long grappled with economic disparities, infrastructural deficits, and limited access to essential services, placing it in a disadvantaged position compared to many other areas. Empowering Alaska tribal governments with jurisdiction over Indian Country could stimulate economic and infrastructural development.

#### **Language to be included in the S. 2615—Alaska Native Village Municipal Lands Restoration Act of 2023:**

##### **1. SEC. 3. OPTION TO TRANSFER VILLAGE MUNICIPAL LANDS TO TRIBAL GOVERNMENT.**

2. (a) A Village Corporation re-acquiring lands under section 2
3. hereof is authorized to transfer such lands by sale or gift to the
4. federally-recognized Tribe located within or in close proximity to
5. said lands, provided, that the regional Alaska Native corporation as
6. owner of the subsurface of said lands consents to such transfer.
7. (b) At the option of the Tribe, the Secretary of the Interior
8. shall within 90 days (i) take such lands into trust status upon
9. transfer of title from the Tribe, or (ii) acknowledge such lands as
10. owned by the Tribe in restricted fee status. Such lands
11. shall be considered Indian Country pursuant to 25 USC 1151.
12. (c) This section shall only apply to the Village Corporations
13. and the Tribes located within the area of the Calista Region
14. Corporation defined under 43 USC 1606(a)(4).

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you so much.  
Our final witness today is Mr. Charles Menadelook.

**STATEMENT OF CHARLES MENADELOOK, SUBSISTENCE  
DIRECTOR, KAWERAK, INC.**

Mr. MENADELOOK. Hello. Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for being here and thank you, everybody, for being here.

I don't have a summary written out. I guess how I will start out, if you read my presentation that I had two days to prepare, my main, the main reason that I wrote it was to give you the realization that in my opinion, and I am not a researcher, I am not a scientist, I am just a subsistence resource program director.

But in my opinion, if we don't do anything, we will run out of salmon, we will run out of marine mammals in the northern Bering Sea within the next five or six years. The reason I say that is because the environment in the Bering Sea is changing so fast that it is doing an upheaval in all populations that live in the Arctic. When I say northern Bering Sea, I mean from the Pribilof Islands to the Diomed Islands. That is the northern Bering Sea. And that is the part of the Pacific Ocean that is being affected the most in our region.

The reason I say that is because we are having pollock that weren't traditionally in our waters in large numbers, they are becoming more prevalent. And they eat everything. That has wide-ranging consequences for the entire Bering Sea, including salmon. They eat everything, they eat what the salmon eat, they eat what every other fish eats.

So I just wanted to let you know that that is the main thing I worry about. We are already seeing the consequences of it, we are seeing seals that have no hair, that have lesions. If you look into symptoms of starvation, those are two of them. So our Bering Sea is changing.

To get back on the subject, I just wanted to bring that up, but I think the main thing that we have to try to do is to change the way that the salmon is managed. Right now, it is managed under max sustainable yield. That means that it is managed toward a maximum commercial yield, instead of any other yield.

I see it in every meeting I have been to with the fish managers, the Federal managers and the State. They all operate under the same thing, how to best keep commercial fishing alive. That is what is killing the salmon.

Just to go into the issue of bycatch, in 2021, I did a little bit of research, and I promised my boss that I wouldn't bring up numbers, but I can't help it. By 2021, the average bycatch for the pollock fishery was 141 million pounds. That is all species, including salmon. By 2021, that average had dropped down to 33 million pounds.

My main question, and I didn't write this in my presentation, I probably should have, my biggest question is what happened to 111 million pounds of bycatch, out of a 10-year average of 141 million pounds? There is 111 million pounds missing.

What does it mean? Does it mean that the Bering Sea cannot sustain the levels of bycatch that it has for the last 10 years and

the fish populations, all species are crashing? Is that what it means?

My point is, we don't know, and neither do you, neither does the State. They need to find out why, and not continue the level of by-catch that is going on right now. They could very well kill everything within the next couple of years if that train continues.

Thank you, that is all I have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Menadelook follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHARLES MENADELOOK, SUBSISTENCE DIRECTOR,  
KAWERAK, INC.

Thank you, committee members, for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to testify today.

Kawerak, Inc. is the regional nonprofit organization that provides many services to the 20 Federally recognized tribes in the Bering Strait/Norton Sound region. One of which is advocating for subsistence user's and subsistence resources alike.

There are a lot of effects that are difficult to quantify into the parameters of this committee hearing, the "impacts" are widespread and heartfelt as is evidenced by many testimonials given to both the State of Alaska; Board of Fish, and the Northern Pacific Fisheries Management Council for decades and have fallen on deaf ears. Alaska Communities have long voiced their opposition through testimony to both Fisheries Management bodies. Over the history of the state of Alaska and federal Management of Fisheries both bodies have operated with the Commercial Harvest given the priority even when stocks originating from our waterways and rivers are depleted to the point that Subsistence Fishing is not allowed. In times of hardship subsistence users bear the burden of conservation, not allowed to harvest a single salmon. Not only have subsistence users faced closures, but we have also been given citations and confiscation of gear. Where is the equality in the decisionmaking process when subsistence users are not allowed to harvest a single salmon to feed themselves or family members, river systems cannot meet escapement goals, yet the commercial fishing industry is allowed to either target salmon in the State of Alaska intercept fishery in the millions where almost a single salmon cannot pass or the federal high seas trawling industry is allowed to bycatch hundreds of thousands of salmon and toss them all over board. Another area where both the state or the federal agencies pass the blame is climate change, lets blame climate change for everything that is happening and still allow millions of salmon to be targeted or wasted. While climate change is a serious issue, that is nothing that any of us have control over. Sound management would be to take control over the things we can manage and let's work together, state & feds, on how more salmon will make it western Alaska to meet or exceed escapement goals and make the state or federal fisheries accountable. For decades Area M fisherman denied allegations that they were "chum chucking" or throwing dead salmon overboard. During the 2023 intercept fishery season the Alaska State Troopers cited several Area M boat captains for "chum chucking". Again, in times of closure how is it fair that the subsistence user is not allowed to harvest a single salmon, bear the burden of conservation, our river systems cannot meet escapement goals, yet industry is allowed to waste thousands upon thousands of salmon.

Traditional subsistence activities for salmon have included Set Net, Seining, Drying, Smoking and storing frozen salmon in our freezers. In the olden days not only were salmon caught to feed families, but salmon were caught to feed dog teams which were the work horse so to speak of the native communities across Alaska, as well as bartered with amongst other communities.

Traditional Subsistence Activities were not just to sustain us but became a part of who we are and how we lived in Alaska. The definition of Subsistence in Websters Dictionary is this "the action or fact of maintaining or supporting oneself at a minimum level." Obviously or not, this definition is not totally accurate in how we view subsistence. This is not who we are. We take pride in our traditional subsistence activities because we do this to feed our loved ones and our communities. For instance, families divide the salmon we catch and dry them into bundles of 50 dry fish to give to our sisters and brothers families and our close relatives who we know do not have access to make their own dry fish. This is Traditional Subsistence.

As an Inupiaq man I cannot comment with any authority on the impacts to our Health. What I can speak with authority on are the impacts to our subsistence way of life and the resource, Salmon.

The southern Seward Peninsula faced a chum salmon closure that lasted nearly 30 years. Fishing gear was limited to Rod and Reel only, this was in an effort to conserve any chum salmon caught and they were to be released back in to the river system alive. When chum salmon stocks finally started meeting escapement goals on the southern Seward Peninsula we were the only subregion in the state that had a Tier II Chum Fishery. Consequently, during the late 1980s and early 1990s Kawerak has tried to bring up the Area M intercept Fishery which has been proven to be taking salmon in the millions bound for western Alaska and the federal high seas fishery where hundreds of thousands of salmon are tossed overboard and wasted.

Salmon By-catch. By law trawlers are allowed to catch and discard species that are not targeted in their harvest of a species. In this case Pollock.

The current system will only recognize that there are fewer fish in the by-catch category because there were fewer fish caught at the time of harvest and not that there are just less fish in the population. If this inability or unwillingness to recognize salmon populations being affected remains the norm, then we will see the by-catch numbers continue to fall until the salmon populations become extinct. And the same will be true of all species of fish caught as by-catch.

Thank you for the chance to testify and warmest regards.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I want to thank each of you for your written comments and what you have shared here for the committee and community.

We can get really technical when we talk about subsistence. You have your RACs, you have boards, you have dual Federal-State management system who qualifies, and all that. But at the end of the day, what it really comes down to is how you not only feed your families, but how you keep your culture and traditions alive.

As I am listening, I am reflecting on how important this conversation is for us in this room, but for us to carry this to Washington, D.C. I don't believe that most people in America can relate to being salmon people. Most people in America don't relate to one food source. When you think about our farmers and ranchers, they don't call themselves the people of the cows or the people of the chickens.

And I don't mean to be light, but it is a reality that you are connected to a resource, a food resource, a specific resource, that of the salmon. Or maybe you are the people of Anaktuvuk, and you are the caribou people, you are the walrus people, the whale people.

That is why it is so important that your connection to this resource be shared in a way that people from Washington, D.C. and other parts of the Country may not be able to quickly grasp. So because the name of this hearing is the impact of the salmon declines on the health and well-being of our Alaska Native community in these regions, I am going to ask several of you, when you rely on salmon for your food source, it is not just because it is what is on sale. It is because it is what you have. When you don't have it, what do you do?

Chairman Ridley, you mentioned that there were substantial efforts to purchase salmon to be able to distribute to families. I would like to hear from those of you that live here with your families in rural Alaska how you actually are dealing with the food insecurity, the challenges with replacing these wild food sources.

Because if I go to most people, most of my colleagues, they will say, well, if it is not salmon season, eat something else, go to the store, and you eat something else. So I am trying to make an impression in the record here about what it means when your primary food source is no longer available.

I want to have you reinforce that. As we got off the airplane today, some stranger welcomed me. He said, I am so glad you are here, I am so glad you are here listening to the people talking about salmon. He said, you realize that a gallon of milk here in Bethel is \$12 a gallon. So it is not like you can replace things by going to the grocery store.

I think it was you, Chairperson Tikiun, as well as Chairman Ridley, you mentioned the impact on young people. Chairman Ridley, I think you mentioned the issue of suicide. We think about, when we can't teach our children in the ways of the land and the ways of our culture, what else replaces that?

I am going to ask for a little bit of unstructured conversation around these themes for the next five minutes or so. I called out a couple of you, if you would choose to speak to it. I don't know how we are handling this, because we apparently only have one mic. We will just pass it along.

We will start down there with Chairman Tikiun and Chairman Ridley.

Mr. TIKIUN. With the salmon crash that is happening in our region, and the impact it has had on our whole region here, not only in our area here but other regions of the State, some of the teachings that we had as we were growing up, the sayings that we had, those and the camps, when I was growing up, we always fished as a group. A lot of people fished together as a family group. And we all met each other and we shared our fish. That is what we did.

Those that were fishing, at the time if they got too many fish, they would share with all the other people, the other fish camps in the area. Everybody did that. My mother at that time would accept fish from somebody else that had had gotten too many, and we would do the same thing. We would share with all the other family members and others that had issues with motors. At that time, they didn't have a lot of equipment. Everybody shared everything that they had, motor parts, nets, things like that.

You don't see that now. Now, you have real small groups of families that are just the family itself, you don't have the kinship with the other family members. That is what I see. And that is being lost, the way I have seen it. That's being lost.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for that.

Brian?

Mr. RIDLEY. The thing that I want to mention is that we had the attorney general up here this summer. I am glad we got to spend some time out in the rural areas, to be able to show him how expensive a gallon of milk is, fuel, all that kind of stuff.

But I go back to 2022, the summer, I had an elder talk to us from our region who said they lived through the Great Depression, but they didn't even know there was a Great Depression, because we had all that we needed. We had all the fish and game that we needed.

I think about that today, the old CFO in me, or banker in me seeing the economy the way it is, cost of living, all that kind of stuff and all the issues we are dealing with. If our people had the fish and the game and all those things, we would have full freezers and all those things about the economy wouldn't even matter. But that is not the case.



Across our region, it is not just fish, it is moose and caribou issues that we are running into. As the salmon have gone away, we have had to rely more on sheefish and whitefish, and now those numbers are starting to drop. It is like this perfect storm going on across our region. That is why it is such a big priority to us.

The one thing I did want to mention, because I had to cut so much out of my written comments that you have, is that recently we documented our customary and traditional use of salmon back 11,000 years. I believe it is the earliest evidence in North America proving how far back our people were salmon people, and that when the salmon suffer, our people suffer.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Brian.

Let me ask you, Chairman Samuelson, about the impact that we are seeing on our young people when these cultures, as Chairman Tikiun has noted, you are not doing the community gathering and the sharing so much. The impact that we are seeing, whether with mental health issues, drugs and substance abuse issues, as a young person who grew up all up and down these rivers, what are you seeing in regard to impacts when families are not able to harvest together?

Mr. SAMUELSON. At the height of the pandemic, we ran into hunting season. My brother is the provider for my family when it comes to moose. On September 12th or so, he called and said, I have COVID, I don't know if I can go out. A day or two later he called and said, I went out, I got a moose, because I have no choice.

The provider role in our communities is so important. I always get shaky when I talk about these things. When we are forced to deviate from our traditional ways of life, it only amplifies our unwellness. Our way of life and our cultural knowledge, the way that we be in the world is our path to wellness, and we know that.

So when we are forced to go off that track and we have no means to get back to wellness, we end up with things like mental illnesses, suicide, physical unwellness because we are not actively out there doing this activity, spiritual unwellness that leads to all these things.

In our way of being, we are meant to get the next generation ready, we are always getting ready, that is what the Yup'ik people say, for whatever is next, the season, life, we are always getting ready. So we are not able to do that.

And as a younger person in the indigenous community, I am worried that I don't have enough time and knowledge to take up and lead my people, and that there is even less for me to give to the next generation. It all circles back to our health and well-being. I know this is a roundabout way of answering your question, but there is no way to silo the answers and the ecosystem. If we are hungry for fish, the bears are hungry. If the bears are hungry, they are eating something else. They are eating something else and there is less of those moose and caribou for us to supplement our diets.

We have no choice but to be aware of every part and piece of the ecosystem, because everything is connected. And it all comes back to the fish at the heart of it. So our people really, really suffer when everything is not in balance.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for that. It was very thoughtful.

I want to ask one more question on health. Mr. Winkelman, you outlined a great deal for us in terms of just the nutritional value of salmon. We get that. It is vitally important.

But as the head of the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, are you concerned that we will continue to see greater health care challenges out in this region, as people do not have the nutritional food source and have to turn to the less nutritional, whether it is pasta or chips or whatever it is?

Also on the mental health issues. We just had a hearing in the Indian Affairs Committee on the fentanyl crisis among Alaska Native peoples. Some of the statistics that we are seeing, some of the deaths that we are seeing in small, small villages in this area as well due to fentanyl. Share just a little bit anecdotally if you can on some of the health consequences of not having the access to salmon as well as some of the mental health considerations you are seeing.

Mr. WINKELMAN. Yes, there are two things going on. When you are not able to go fishing, you are not able to do the physical activity, so there is that that you lose, the actual physical activity that is helping to keep you at a healthy weight. Then you are not able to go get the food. So we have seen increasing weights out here as our diets have changed to more western diets.

If you look at this region and you look at the history of how much we actually eat from traditional foods, it is actually one of the highest in the entire State, with the exception of the North Slope. So we are still doing well with foodstuffs and how much we eat per pound over a year.

But it is definitely decreasing, and has already decreased evidently for Yukon people and Kuskokwim people. Coastal people still have an ocean to fish from, the way the regulations are out there, which are different than what we are dealing with on the river system.

But definitely the activity, there is less activity, more using four-wheelers to go check the mail at the post office when you are in the village, and less walking, less physical activity, less hunting opportunities, less fishing opportunities.

Then if you look at, I was just touring, had the Alaska Mental Health Trustees out here, and we toured for three days and took them to four different villages, both up on the Yukon and here on the Kuskokwim, and then out on the coast. They could not believe how well attended; we were literally in those four villages with half a room full of this many people. Because people are concerned about their kids and schools.

What is happening in our school system, we are not able to develop the support systems that are needed, the schools don't have enough money to have enough counselors, not just for the kids that are having behavioral health issues, but also the teachers that are there, that are dealing with the children, and what happens after a suicide attempt.

I just heard that in Kwethluk, from the superintendent there, then also from their leadership there about, there was a gentleman, Boris [phonetically]. Boris held up, when we were talking, he held up this thing, I am holding up a cell phone. And he goes, this is killing our kids. He is very worried about all the dramatic

changes that I just talked about and that we just listened to for the last hour.

It is not just the subsistence needs and the lack of opportunities, but it is, what are you going to do with these kids? What are they doing? Because that is how we grow our kids up, is through their attachment to the land and the wonderful subsistence opportunities that we have out here in our region, which is like nothing other.

As that is becoming more restrictive, it is changing our interactions with our children, and our children are looking for other things to do. You mentioned drugs, they may turn to that, they may turn to booze, they may turn to other things, things that are online that little kids shouldn't be doing. All those things Boris was really concerned about and expressed that to the Alaska Mental Health Trustees, which I was so happy to have out here, and show them the actual behavioral health needs out here in our region, which are tremendous, and how we need to develop more solutions with mental health care.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for that.

I want to switch gears a little bit here to co-management, as several of you have mentioned this afternoon.

We had a hearing in the Senate Energy Committee about 10 years ago on subsistence. One of the key takeaways from that was the need for Native people to have a seat at the table, equal voice in management of subsistence resource. You have the local knowledge, you know the whole ecosystem, as we are talking about here, better than anyone. I think that this is an area where the Federal Government really can and should extend a hand as an equal partner. There is a lot more that can be done here.

We have tried to better facilitate better co-management opportunities with Native organizations and tribes across the board, including the work of the inter-tribal fish commissions, contracts for data collection, other research in mammal co-management groups. But I think there is a lot more we can be doing here.

So I want to ask both you, Mr. Samuelson, and you, Ms. Ulvi, with regard to the Kuskokwim Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and the work that you are doing there, are we incorporating the input of local people who really do have the local knowledge of these rivers and the salmon? Do you feel that that input, that local input, is given the appropriate weight in terms of how salmon are managed in these rivers? Then the same question directed to you as well, Chairwoman Ulvi, with your experience on the Yukon.

Mr. SAMUELSON. Thank you for that question. The fish commissions were born in 2015 out of necessity, our salmon crashed, they weren't rebounding like we had seen in the past, because there have been crashes before, followed by rebounds. We still haven't seen that rebound since 2012.

So our fish commissions, the tribes on our rivers and our watersheds realized we had to organize in a way to give our fish a chance. It has been an uphill battle ever since. On the Kuskokwim, we advocate for Federal management, because of the trust responsibility. There is no mechanism through current regulation with the State of Alaska that ensures subsistence as a priority. So we have to turn to our Federal partners here.

We do have a working MOU with Fish and Wildlife Service, and new efforts such as the Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative are working to incorporate and elevate indigenous voice and knowledge. But at the end of the day, without authority and true co-stewardship, we operate as advisors.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So let me ask on that, I want to get your input on this. Because again, what we set this up to do was to facilitate exactly that, to get the local knowledge incorporated, to have the voices truly listened to. So there is a difference between kind of being in an advisory capacity and really feeling like you are part of that decision making.

Do I take your comment to believe that you don't really feel that you are at that equal level in terms of decision making?

Mr. SAMUELSON. I think we have made a lot of progress on both sides, to have that meaningful co-stewardship and everyone sitting at the table. What worries me is that it is very dependent on who is in that position at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agreements don't run with the agency, or the government. They kind of run with the people. And we are here to stay.

So I don't want to diminish the great work that the Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Service have done, and the progress that we have made as this demonstration project, but I do want to just note that there are no permanent protections for that co-stewardship.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me ask Chairwoman Ulvi.

Ms. ULVI. The Yukon, Kuskokwim has come a long way with co-stewardship. The Yukon is a little different because we have State and Federal waters like a checkerboard running all down the Yukon.

As we are trying to get co-stewardship of the river, we see that there is a lot of, in the Federal processes, there should be government-to-government consultations with the tribes that are not necessarily happening. That would help a lot, to let us have a seat at the table and to hear our concerns and how we can help in managing the resources.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Ms. Borrromeo, I want to bring you into this conversation about management of subsistence resources. In your written testimony, and you have also spoken a little bit to it, the importance of co-management, the tribal-Federal partnerships, the need to build capacity to continue and to grow co-management. In your view, how do we do it?

Ms. BORRROMEO. Thank you, Vice Chair Murkowski. We do it through the mechanisms that we already have in place with Federal law. ANILCA allows for demonstration projects, so let's have a demonstration project on co-management. Let's fund it.

You have taken a huge step forward by moving the Office of Subsistence Management under the Secretary of Interior, thank you for that. I know it was a lot of work, me constantly calling you and asking you to carry the heavy load. I can't imagine. But you always answered the phone.

So that would be one way that we could move this forward. And our track record is clear, that when we do manage our own world, we have places like YKHC, like ANMC, that didn't happen overnight. When I was a kid, and I still remember receiving services

at ANS downtown on Fourth Avenue. I think a lot of people in this room do. We can collectively agree that our health care system managed by Alaska Natives is light years ahead of what it used to be when it was managed 100 percent by Indian Health Service.

So if we were able to manage the resource, if we have funding that was stable for a dedicated period of time that we knew was available to us, and we could work across regions to really further co-management, that is what I would recommend.

In addition to the Kuskokwim River fish commission, Yukon, too, Ahtna also has a co-management structure that it is ready to go too. So let's not just have one demonstration, let's have fish and game at the same time. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you.

Several of you have mentioned either here at the table or in your written testimony that the salmon management in the Federal Government is disjointed. I would certainly echo that. But you mentioned cooperation with Fish and Wildlife in the region that doesn't necessarily extend to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, and the Department of Commerce. Both of them have management responsibilities for salmon.

So any ideas on how to fix this? Again, to address the lack of co-stewardship agreements with Commerce agencies, with NMFS, how we are better able to put tribal voices into the marine management. I guess in addition to asking if you have specific ideas as to how you might fix it, have any of the folks from the Commerce Department actually visited the region to talk about co-management? I don't know the answer to that. Everyone is shaking their heads. You would be the ones, if anybody knew if they were coming out here.

That is very telling to me, that there is a real gap there, when you don't even have somebody from the Department that you can identify that has come out to say, hey, what can we do on this. So this is kind of an open-ended question to those of you as to whether or not you have any specific ideas as to how we can address this lack of co-stewardship agreements with these agencies at the Federal level.

Mr. MENADELOOK. Senator, we have had meetings with your staff, Dr. Rob Foy, and there was another lady that was for the Office of Protected Species that came by. She seemed like she was pretty amenable to what we were talking about.

But I will let you know that when I did my, I call it my end of the world speech, the numbers that I gave to him, he said that I would be a person to watch and that he would personally send me the correct numbers.

Well, I will let you know right now, those numbers I just gave you are from their own website and their reports. So they are what I extrapolated myself without looking to him. But just to let you know that he told me that he would personally send me the right numbers. So I never heard from him.

I will say as far as co-management and co-stewardship with NOAA, I haven't seen it yet. Otherwise we would be in some really big discussions right now. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So, one of the things that I often hear is that on Federal lands and waters, our subsistence resources and

habitat are not being actively managed to ensure viable resource populations. We hear that part of the problem is conflicting statutes, missions of the differing land management agencies. I get that. But what ends up happening, unfortunately, is you are working against facilitating healthy subsistence populations instead of facilitating them.

So I am curious to know around the table if you would agree with that and whether or not there are management activities that in your view the Federal land management agencies like Fish and Wildlife Service should be taking to actively manage subsistence resources.

Then, another question that I don't know the answer to is whether or not any of these Native organizations have proposed management activities that have been rejected by any of our Federal managers. In other words, you have presented proposals and suggestions and they have been rebuffed. Again, I throw that out to anyone down the line.

Mr. MENADELOOK. I think in my view and with co-management of the AMBCC, the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council, the biggest problem that we run into is funding.

The funding for the 11 regions that are in the AMBCC, only is like \$300,000. You cannot co-manage a species or all species of birds with only \$300,000. I have seen some regions in Alaska that are operating on \$15,000. How are you supposed to co-manage anything with that type of money? And these numbers are current. This is not 50 years ago. This is this year.

So we really do need your help in getting money. If you are serious about talking about co-management, you have to look at getting more funding for it. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Menadelook. Also to recognize that these competitive grants are also equally problematic.

Anybody else want to weigh in there? Yes, Chief Ridley.

Mr. RIDLEY. I just wanted to say, the more I learn about this entire process and was kind of shocked at how it all works or doesn't work, I think the big focus that we have right now is with co-management or whatever, we are still running up against the board that I mentioned, the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the State Board of Fish, those seats. We fight like heck and we get one Native person on there, but it is one out of eight or ten or whatever it is.

So trying to find some way to improve that and make sure the different user groups are accounted for, with us it has been education as far as I feel like that group has only cared about the industry. You go to the meetings, that is all they talk about, well, the industry told us we need to do this, so that is what we are doing.

And I feel like somehow, maybe I am being too simplistic, is that we have to be able to manage State waters, Federal waters, holistically. Because as I mentioned, our fish are going through all these different waters, they don't care, we don't care. I mean, before there was a State, we didn't have these borders to deal with. Now we have these different, oh, well, this is Federal, this is State. Somehow, we have to get our arms wrapped around it to where we

are managing as a whole and the folks in the Bering Sea realize they are affecting our fish.

As I said, even if they are saying, oh, but it is only 1 percent of our catch is your salmon, that is over 100,000 of our fish. That will be huge, when we only have 15,000 kings and 15,000 fall chum making it into Canada. An extra 130,000 would go a long way.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We have come onto the end of the time that we were going to do the formal testimony here. But I want to ask one more question, and I think it is highly appropriate, because I think perhaps each and every one of you has asked or recommended some kind of legislative fix to Title VIII of ANILCA or other legislative action to affirm Native hunting and fishing rights in Alaska. Know that I absolutely hear and understand the fears that you have about the future of subsistence, and really the bitterness that is out there that has been caused by the recent legislation to effectively defend the status quo here.

I agree with you, I think we have a system that is broken. The history of Title VIII and what we all lived through, maybe some of you are too young, but what many of us lived through as a State on subsistence in the recent past makes it really hard to envision how we are actually going to get to a unified system of management.

But it is absolutely a conversation that we have to have, and I am really glad that AFN started it at the convention last month.

I think we recognize, as important as your Federal delegation is, and we all work hard on these issues, Federal legislative changes are just tough. They are, particularly on a statute like ANILCA. We simply have to have everybody on board, we have to have people pulling together. I don't mean to be discouraging, I am trying to be very pragmatic and clear-eyed.

We have some serious divisions in Congress these days on just about everything. So as we move into these difficult conversations, I think the more honest we can be with one another is so important.

Know that I am absolutely not dismissing changes to ANILCA or any other legislation here. But I am just going to ask, for just a moment, because believe me, I got the message here, in my notes I think I underscored each time somebody mentioned it.

But I would like you to help me out. If you think there are, if you have any suggestions that we can perhaps help advance administratively, at the Federal level right now, in other words, ideas that we can put in place to help improve subsistence management now without legislation. I ask this because what I am hearing from you is families are in need, communities are suffering. Alaska Native people in this region are suffering because the resource is not there.

I do not have that magic button that can put fish back in the river now. We all know that. So as we suffer through challenging, hard times right now, and as we work to try to change things legislatively, recognizing that that too takes time, are there perhaps things that can be more immediate in what we can do?

I mentioned to you the Office of Subsistence Management. Several of you have raised that perhaps having that office under the direct supervision of the Secretary does help move the needle here.

I am going to turn the mic to you, Nicole, because you mentioned in your written testimony that AFN has offered on numerous occasions recommendations to improve the Federal subsistence board, and only two of those recommendations have been implemented since you did that a dozen years or so ago.

Is there anything more we could do with that at the administrative level? Again, what more we might be able to do from a co-management perspective to help address the non-competitive based funding issue?

I am going to throw it out here. This is the last chance that you all will have the mic here. So we are going to be respectful of time, but these are really important suggestions for me as we try to wrap up this end of the discussion.

I am going to turn to Nicole first.

Ms. BORROMEO. Thank you, Senator.

Moving the Office of Subsistence Management under the Interior Secretary was, as I said, a step in the right direction. I think we have to give that careful oversight and make sure that that office also has the funding and autonomy to really perform how it is supposed to.

That, just continuing to let them know in your friendly ways that you are keeping an eye on how that relationship is developing, and if that office is able to better perform for Alaska would go a long way.

Your second question about co-management and what else we can do, thinking outside of the box, it might be an opportunity right now to have another discussion about hatcheries. I know that has been something that has been hit or miss in the Native community and across the State in years past. But our way of life is changing, our food sources are changing, and fish isn't coming back.

So if we can at least cultivate that here, and maybe that is an opportunity for Native people to get involved in co-management, is in administering those hatcheries. I think you might find support from the Secretary of Interior for those ideas right now. I was speaking with her recently about a tribe in California that had sent some of its cohort to New Zealand. Their streams went dry and their fish weren't coming back. So that tribe went down to New Zealand and brought some of its original stock back, and they are repopulating their streams.

We have to figure out a way to make sure that the resource returns. Management isn't the only path forward. There has to be different avenues. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Other comments from anyone on the panel?

Mr. SAMUELSON. Thank you. People in the river systems are doing everything they can. We have been for a long time. We are essentially starving so that our fish have a chance.

What we need is ideally, authority to make decisions on behalf of our salmon relatives, rather than fill seats here and there and hope to have influence. Authority can come without changing the law. That delegation can come down.

I have three quick quotes for you. "When I was growing up, as a boy, learning to fish from my mom down near Tuntutuliak, she taught me that we have to let these fish go, because there are peo-



ple way up the river who need them, too.” One of our elder advisors at the Fish Commission.

”We need to reconsider this vote, because we have no idea what we voted on.” The Federal Subsistence Board, on Kuskokwim River Fisheries in a meeting on the record. We need to reconsider this vote, because we have no idea what we voted on.

So we need at least equal representation on the Federal Subsistence Board. It is made up of people who have no connection to our way of life, to our region, to our salmon. But they have that decision making authority.

”Well, I guess that is the end of a people and a way of life,” someone who sits on the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, when talking about the Yukon. “The end of a culture.”

The latter two quotes are from people who have decision making authority on us and our relatives and our ways of life. We need mandated tribal seats at every one of these bodies as a start to the answer. We need tribal involvement at every step of the way. Because our elders trained us to think, we have to let these fish go, because other people need them too, versus, we are going to take as much as we can and hope that we have some more again.

It is a simple shift. We don’t need Congressional action for some of these items. We just need that mandated co-stewardship. And as I mentioned before, we are ready and willing to do this work and to lead this work.

Mr. TIKIUN. The one thing I would like to say is on the co-management, the different agencies or different tribes have been talking about co-management. I know on Kuskokwim, it is happening down here in Bethel.

But we need both the State and the Feds to talk together also. That is where some of the issues are coming from. Unless we get that done, we are going to continue to have that problem on down the line. Those two agencies, the State, also need to sit down and talk together.

That is one thing we could do. Otherwise, we are just going to come, okay, one thing on co-management, another thing, move on down, another litigation will come up, unless some kind of agreement is made between the two agencies. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you.

Mr. RIDLEY. If I may, our friends in the Ahtna area, I have heard them say, hopefully co-management is just a stepping stone to whole management by Native people. That is what I would hope, is that we could get to that point.

Like I said, the more I learn about this process, be it State or Federal, the more I have concerns that it has been so politicized. I said that when I testified last spring in Juneau, and the chair of the Finance Committee agreed, she was shaking her head about how politicized the process has gotten.

Then I think, to touch briefly on the State lawsuit currently, they are claiming they have a subsistence priority, but clearly, they don’t.

Finally, one of the things we have been hoping for is with MSA reauthorization, trying to get the tribal seats. As I understand it, there is a bit of gridlock happening and issues in D.C. So if there is anything we can do to help you get that pushed through, by all

means let us know. We would be happy to partner with you to try to get that.

Again, it is not going to be a perfect solution, but hopefully it is a stepping stone in the right direction. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you.

Ms. ULVI. Senator, I was just wondering if we could take some time and write up some things, some realistic expectations for you and send that after this meeting. Would we be able to do that?

Senator MURKOWSKI. That is actually a perfect lead, because what I was going to do next, after thanking everyone, was to remind you all that the record will remain open for two weeks now. So anything that you might wish to supplement for the record will be included as part of that.

Again, what you provided the committee in advance with your written testimony is incorporated, everything that has been shared here today verbally will be included, and anything that you would like to supplement, and I really appreciate your raising that and offering that. Because I know sometimes it is not fair, you are going to get home, you are going to wake up at 3:00 o'clock and say, I wish that I had said, or offered up this as an option. Please know that we would welcome those, not just as an afterthought, but really to fully supplement the record. Thank you for raising that.

Any final questions? Mr. Menadelook?

Mr. MENADELOOK. This is not a question, but I just wanted to say sorry about my doom and gloom presentation.

[Laughter.]

Mr. MENADELOOK. The one thing I do want to say, I do talk to my nieces and nephews. This has started, since I have started this job, I tell them they need to go fishing. They need to go snow hunting. Because I don't think it is going to be around much longer.

Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Thank you for sharing in ways that are both informative and personal. I appreciate that a great deal.

With that, we will now take a break, about 15 minutes, get up and stretch, walk around the room, then we will reconfigure something up here and go into the public comments section. Thank you.

[Recess 2:55 p.m. to 3:26 p.m.]

#### **PUBLIC LISTENING SESSION**

Senator MURKOWSKI. This is the public listening session portion of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, our field hearing to examine the impact of the historic salmon declines on the health and well-being of Alaska Native communities along the Arctic, Yukon, and the Kuskokwim Rivers.

So as was mentioned previously, this session is being broadcast live on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs website. It will also be part of the field hearing official record.

This public listening session is very important. It is extremely important because again, this is Congress' opportunity to hear directly from the public at large. We had invited witnesses, it was important to be able to hear from certain tribal leaders, from those

that are involved in different leadership levels associated with subsistence. This is the opportunity to hear from the public.

So I want to outline at the start how we are going to conduct this part of the session. We had a sign-up sheet at the back of the room. I think everyone who wished to sign up to speak has done so. There are 35 individuals who have signed up. I will call people in the order that they have signed up to come up to the front here to speak.

When you come up, I would ask that you please provide your name for the record. You will be given three minutes for your comments. I know that three minutes is not nearly adequate. I understand that, and I hope that you know that we don't mean to be disrespectful in saying only three minutes to share. But as you can see, with 35 people that have signed up who all wish to weigh in, in order for us to keep this within a two-hour-plus time parameter, we will have to try and respect the time limits.

We will have a timer right up front. So when your time is up after three minutes, you will see that the clock is up. You will also hear a small buzzer, not too annoying. But again, we want to make sure that we are respectful to everybody who has come and who has asked for their moment to speak.

If you would like to add further comments after your three minutes, we have a side room in the back. Cordelia and Angela are standing back there waving at you. They are super-nice ladies. They are going to give an opportunity for you to go in the back room there and to record additional remarks. There will not be a three-minute time clock back there. So you can share on the record.

So what you state up here will be part of the record, and then we will incorporate your additional remarks afterwards. Again, we want to be fair to everyone with their time up here. But we will be generous in making sure that you feel you have that opportunity to be fully heard.

I am going to call up the first three names to kick this off, so you know where you are in the timeline. When you come up, I would ask for you to speak into the handheld mic, and hold the mic very close to your mouth. Our translator is having a difficult time hearing if you do not put the mic close. So it is going to be uncomfortable. But please do it anyway.

We are cognizant that this is flu and COVID season, so we will have wipes that you can wipe down the mic when you move from person to person. But please, please put it close to your mouth.

Again, thank you for the time that you are giving us. Thank you for your respectful comments, not only to the committee, but to your friends and neighbors here in the region. So the first three names on the list are Beverly Hoffman from Bethel, Vivian Korthuis from AVCP, and Gloria Simeon from here in Bethel. Beverly will come first, then Vivian and then Gloria.

Welcome, Beverly.

Ms. HOFFMAN. Senator, I did take you out when the salmon crashed about a decade ago. You saw the fish camps, and you talked to the people. But I want to say quyana to everyone who has come to Bethel today to hear us, and to thank our folks that were up here with you to tell our story.

My name is Beverly Hoffman. I was born and raised right here in Bethel, Alaska. I am a tribal member, shareholder. But today I am speaking for myself. I have worked hard to be a good steward of this land and water. I am a subsistence gatherer, and I have been all my life.

It saddens me that we are here today in this place in this time. For too many years our fish racks have been empty, leaving us frustrated and our hearts saddened.

I am 72. I have sat on these advisory councils for several decades, State, Federal, North Pacific Marine Fishery, all advisory. I still stay informed of all these groups, even today, including the Intertribal Fish Commission, which I truly support.

We have been talking about the reasons for our salmon declines for over two decades: trawlers, climate change, mining impact risks. So now here we are at this crucial point in time. We, the people of the YK region, have been restricted from fishing for king salmon, while trawlers continue to throw the same salmon overboard. The crab, halibut, and other species are also affected.

For many years, we have testified to protect our food. We are the stewards of the land, the water, the oceans, pleading for something to be done. There is much I want you and policy makers to do. First, address the specific waste of the trawling industry. You don't need legislation to do that, to reduce trawler bycatch. The industry is destroying the ocean nutrients over-fishing. Our Yukon and Kuskokwim ecosystem depends on a healthy salmon spawning river. We lose our salmon; we lose everything we love.

Second, there must be reform in fishery management on both State and Federal levels, as there is too much emphasis on commercial operations and very little protecting our way of life and the gathering of our subsistence foods. I felt relieved to hear you talk at AFN about this situation.

Third, it is disheartening to see large extraction open pit mines like Donlin and others being developed on our salmon spawning rivers. I request we do a new environmental impact statement on Donlin. Climate change has caused warming temperatures that impact our salmon. We need that new data.

It is my hope you will hear the difference, and that you will do all you can to work with us and protect us as we continue to fight for our very existence.

Quyana.

[Applause.]

Ms. KORTHUIS. Good afternoon. My name is Vivian Korthuis, and I am sorry for my voice. I am fighting a cold.

I serve as the Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents. I would like to thank Senator Murkowski and members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and all your staff for organizing this field hearing to hear directly from our tribes and our people in the region.

When the AVCP, Kawerak, TCC, and AFN first made the request for a Congressional field hearing in September of 2021, we were two years into the salmon crash. Now, we are in year four. This empty bag represents empty smokehouses and freezers all across western Alaska in our villages. I have shared this many times before. It is just a symbol of things that are happening in our

communities and our homes and our individual lives across the region.

The crash has been extremely devastating for families and communities in the AYK region, involving more than 100 tribal communities. Just in our region alone, there are 30,000 people who are directly impacted. Some may think that what is happening in our villages is not important. But it is jeopardizing the way of life of our communities.

What is happening in our villages is really unfair. Our subsistence fishing has the least impact on the salmon crash. Yet we are the only ones being restricted and prevented from practicing our way of life. No one else is being asked to take hold or not make any changes.

We need immediate action to find solutions to this crisis. It will take a holistic approach to make changes that will allow the salmon to recover. Everyone has a role to play.

I believe that the AYK salmon crash is a test for the Arctic Strategy for the Federal Government. The 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic emphasizes four pillars: security, climate change, environmental protection, and economic development.

Alaska is the geopolitical center of the United States. The salmon crash in our region is the test of the United States' ability to respond to a crisis in the Arctic. How will the United States mitigate the impacts of changes in our environment and protect and restore the salmon?

To the rest of the Country, we are located on the edge of the map. In my mind, I want to make sure that the tribes in Alaska, even if we live in the most remote parts of the United States, matter.

In closing, Senator Murkowski, subsistence matters, our villages matter, salmon matters, and our way of life matters. Thank you. [Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Excuse me one moment. This is a question to staff. For those who have written comments, would we like them to provide the committee with those written comments as well?

Yes, okay. So Vivian and Beverly, if you have written comments, if you could provide us with those. No pressure on the rest of you who do not have full-on written beautiful comments. I just noticed that several of them did.

Gloria, welcome.

Ms. SIMEON. Thank you. And thank you, Senator Murkowski, for making this opportunity available for us, and for YK for making the space available.

My name is Gloria Simeon. I am a citizen of the Orutsararmiut Traditional Native Council. I am a woman of the Kuskokwim River and a user, the ultimate end user who bears the burden of conservation on our resource.

I would like to start with a gentle reminder that the United States Government is the trustee of all matters pertaining to American Indians and Alaska Natives. This includes our very being, our tribal rights, our land and resources, as well as our health, education, and welfare.

Furthermore, it is incumbent upon them to protect these rights for generations to come. The obligation is a trust responsibility.

The United States has the most laws to protect the environment and agencies to enforce those laws. Yet the fact is these laws actually hasten environmental degradation and repression, and are made to favor industry. These agencies have sole discretion to issue permits. We have found that they are not always neutral in granting their permissions.

The State of Alaska, as we know, is controlled by pro-extraction industry, pro-development and industry are prioritized over the best interests of 229 tribal nations and their citizens. Decisions are made impacting us and our ability to survive on our own homelands, laws and regulations are passed threatening our access to resources we have relied on since time immemorial, threatening not only our survival, but the survival of generations to come.

Regionally, our own regional and subregional and village corporations also threaten our survival. When tribal interests and survival are in conflict with ANSCA corporations and resource development, corporations win. At what cost?

What do we truly use when we use our land, water and food that sustains us? We belong to this land. It has sustained us for millennia. We have nowhere else to go. To us, subsistence is not a way of life; it is our life.

The looming threats to our survival and ability to access our resources are climate change, deep sea trawling and bycatch allocations, and the proposed Donlin. These are a threat to our ability to subsist on our traditional and customary foods, most importantly salmon.

We are discovering far-reaching ripple effects of climate change. The skin of our tundra has gotten very thin and unstable. River banks are eroding at an alarming rate. Increasingly hot summers have left our land vulnerable to lightning strikes and fire. Mitigation can be achieved with calling an extraction-based development that threatens the First People of this land.

Deep sea trawl bycatch can be controlled by regulation as well as stopping the development of the proposed Donlin Mine. This is not the time or the place to develop the world's largest open pit mine on the backs of the tribal nations of this region. Those nations have already spoken.

In 2019, 35 tribal nations of the AVCP region opposed the proposed Donlin Mine. Let their voices be heard. Failure to do so will be a death blow to my river, to my people, and our survival, before we go extinct. The loss of our critical salmon is ripping and tearing apart the fabric of who we are as Yup'ik and Dene people and practicing our traditional and customary ways of life, which is not a way of life, it is our life.

And fish camp is not an activity, it is a frame of mind. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Gloria.

The next three in line are Christina Changsak from Russian Mission, Fritz Charles from Bethel, and Henry Hunter., Sr., from Bethel.

Ms. CHANGSAK. Good afternoon, Lisa. My name is Christina Changsak from Russian Mission. I am a wife, a mother, and a grandmother.

We use our subsistence way of life all year round. For many years on the Yukon we haven't fished, and I want to teach all my kids and grandkids to fish, because when I am gone, I want that tradition to be known.

This spring, we had a flood which tore down how many fish camps that used their places to fish. Unfortunately, we didn't get to fish much, or not at all.

So we have an all year round subsistence way of life. During summer, we have fishing, toward fall we have bear and moose hunting, in winter we have ice fishing. So we are always busy with subsistence and it is a really big thing for us.

Then in the summer time, Yukon has been, we were on a six-inch mesh net, and then how many years ago we were brought down to four-inch. And you know, Yukon is a big river that, a four-inch, you can't catch anything with that.

So I testified in Anchorage with the Board of Fish, too, and I let them know, a four-inch on the Yukon River, that big of a river is too small, that they should reconsider bringing it back up to six-inch.

Our only ways in and out of our village is by air. So our village has two stores, so pretty much everybody relies on subsistence. And if the weather is bad and the stores run out of things, how many days do we need to wait? So I am really happy there is our subsistence.

That is why I am advocating for our salmon, because we haven't fished so many years. How many of our grandchildren and children crave the fish that we smoke? Even my two-year-old granddaughter asked me for fish, which I couldn't provide for her. To see a two-year-old asking, Oma, can I have fish, and I had to reply to her that we didn't get to fish.

I think it would be nice if the Board of Fish and everybody would think of, we have limited and everybody else should get limited, too. Because it hurt us, especially in the interior Yukon where we were so deprived of all the big places, and we don't get much it like Bethel and Anchorage and everything coming by freight.

I see my time is up. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Christina.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Fritz Charles?

Mr. CHARLES. Hello. My name is Fritz Charles. Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for being out here.

Year after year, dignitaries come out to our region. Year after year, we are telling the same problem to the dignitaries, to the Senators, to the State officials, the Federal Government, with little to no outcome. You see, I have been a fisherman, subsistence end user for my village, and year after year, since the early 1990s, what has been done? Nothing. Nothing.

They come out here to our region, feed us breadcrumbs, and go back home to Washington, D.C. or Juneau. We are tired. No more. Should we even be fighting for our subsistence lifestyle, my subsistence lifestyle that I want to pass down to my children and grandchildren? I don't know about the rest of you, but we are tired.

We want to see some actions. No more, another 15, 20 years of oh, let's do a study. Let's study this with NOAA, with North Pacific

Fisheries Management Council, no more studies. We need to put a cap on trawlers in Area M. That is what we need today.

[Applause.]

Mr. CHARLES. No more. So you go back home to Washington, D.C., Juneau, you come back to me and my people with end results. It is time for a change. Don't get me wrong; I have the upmost respect for the politicians and the dignitaries that came out here today. But we are tired. No more.

And maybe some day soon, we will see a change, change that will better our cultural way of life, which today we are practicing cultural genocide from the Federal and the State government. Let's change that.

The way we are going, yes, we are going to see extinction of salmon within 10 years. And nobody wants that. I know my pockets aren't deep enough for extra money for trawlers. That is what everything is run on, money. Money is power.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Fritz.  
Henry Hunter, Sr.

Mr. HUNTER. Good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you.

I would like you to take a look at this picture. This picture says a thousand words. I want my grandsons and my granddaughters in years ahead to be able to do this, to dry fish.

Last year, I testified before the North Pacific Council on the bycatch, the number of bycatch of salmon that was supposed to be heading to Alaska. I also testified to the State Fish and Game Board on Area M, to put regulations on it. It is like talking to a brick wall to me. Seems like there is no action taken every day on when we tell them our issues.

There has to be, like Mr. Charles before me mentioned, there has to be action taken. This year, we have had regulations on our Kuskokwim. We had windows. In other words, we possibly fished on Monday and then we were shut down.

The regulations on Norton Sound are the same way. They have regulations on the Kuskokwim the same way. On the Yukon, they can't even fish any more. That is what I am afraid of. I am afraid there is going to be no more fishing on the Kuskokwim and also for our neighbors up north in the Norton Sound area.

Like Fritz Charles said, I would like to see some regulations done on the North Pacific Council. When I addressed the North Pacific Council last year, I wanted the regulations to make sure that the reports of bycatch is true. Why is our salmon declining? Is it because of climate change? That could be a part of it. But also, there are a lot of people saying "bycatch," it is high sea fishing.

The other one is the commercial fishing. The State of Alaska supports commercial fishing. If you are a subsistence fisherman, you can forget the State of Alaska supporting you.

We need regulations, like Mr. Charles said, on Area M. That is the only way we can get, I am trying to say let's all share. The Native way is to share. That is what the North Pacific Fisheries Council and Area M should be doing. They should be sharing. But they don't.



So I asked the State Fish and Game Board to put regulations on Area M. Those fish are coming up to the Norton Sound area, to the Yukon, and to the Kuskokwim. One year we advocated with Senator Olson, he introduced Senate Bill 138 or 128, I can't remember. The only way it went to, it went to the committee. And those people in the committee stopped it. It didn't go before the floor.

We need to advocate for the State administration to be more friendly to the Native people in the State of Alaska. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Hunter.

Next up, we have Evon Waska from Bethel, followed by Ray Oney, from Alakanak, and then Nick Andrew, Jr., from Marshall.

Mr. WASKA. Thank you for being here, quyana, [phrase in Native tongue] about time. What Mr. Charles says to Mr. Hunter, and I assume the committee that was up here, AFN, we watched you last year, giving your heart-felt testimony. It was real. But it fell on deaf ears. Board of Fish rejected our proposals, all the testimony given, it all fell on deaf ears, rejected. Like you, we were disappointed. But we have a local radio, KYUK, I encourage my people to stand up, not stay down. I am glad I see you up here. When we are with you, I recognize you.

And enough falling on deaf ears. It is for real. I am seeing abandoned fish camps, no fish on the racks, undue stress on Mom and Dad. Why? There are no fish on the racks, and there is that uncertainty.

Mom and Dad taught us, all my Natives here and listening in on the radio, we are here for you. Mom and Dad taught us as soon as the breakup began and the ice went out, all the debris, Dad would go set nets. Why? They know the salmon are coming. It was knowledge.

It was our way of life, our cultural identity. They would know they were coming. It started from smelts, king salmon, chums, reds and then silvers. And the whole purpose was they passed it down to us to sustain us through these long winter months. We are here 365 days a year. And that is our way of life.

Now it is being broken. Like I told you, we are seeing abandoned fish camps. Lack of fish on the fish racks. Why? We are on restrictions. When I say that, they gave us 6 hour, 12-hour periods and we no longer use king gear. King gear webbing is 8 inch to 8 and a half, back in my dad's day, growing up. Now they restrict the Yukon people to 4 inch. That is for whitefish.

Why do they do this to us? It is our right to subsistence fish and hunt. This is our land. I saw the [indiscernible] station this summer. I asked my friend there, hey, what is that? There was somebody fishing. And these people go down and get fish, restrictions. There were no restrictions on Area M, False Pass. [Indiscernible] commercial fishing. And these trawlers continue dumping.

You want an answer to the decline and how to fix that? You need to stop the trawlers on the dumping and this commercial fishing. Area M and False Pass, you need to make a law to have the escapement from western Alaska. Why? Right there, that is our food source.

And these, they mentioned the mine as a high item. I don't want mines here. Like I said, the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers and the Arctic Rivers, the salmon is our food source.

Thank you for being here and having this forum. It is about time. I hope, as Fritz said, Mr. Charles, this needs to stop. No more falling on deaf ears, it is really happening. And it can be fixed. It is time to deliver the answer. Enough listening to the problem.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Mr. Ray Oney.

Mr. ONEY. Thank you very much, Senator Lisa Murkowski, for being with us today on this historic day, as you said. As you see on this print up here, the impact of the historic decline of the salmon here on the health and well-being of the Alaska Native communities along the Arctic, Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers.

My name is Raymond Oney. I come from the village of Alakanuk, which spills out to the Bering Sea. So we are kind of the people that indicate when the salmon arrives along the coastal villages and the ones that notify us about any fish that are coming into the Yukon.

We haven't seen those fish returns for many years, many years. When I say many years, at least for 20 years, because we have seen the decline of the salmon, ever since the State became a State and regulations kept coming into effect that affect us to gather the resources that we have depended on, especially with the salmon. The salmon is who identifies us as people of the Yukon River. And as you heard, many a time we haven't had an opportunity to subsist or to even put salmon on the table, even to taste.

I recall when the elders heard that they were not going to be allowed to harvest Chinook salmon, the elders cried. They relied on that resource from their ancestors, from their parents and their ancestors that taught them that way of living. That was the only way of living that we knew.

And if you look at the census of the State of Alaska, most of our people in rural villages are hunters, fishers, and trappers. Many of our people are documented that way, hunters, fishers and trappers. That is what I still am today, a hunter, fisher, and trapper. We are very fortunate that you are here to listen to our people, in hopes of bringing back the salmon to our people.

I know one way, as with the late Ted Stevens, he did buyback. I don't know if you recall [indiscernible], but they bought back a lot of trawlers, that reduced the trawlers in the Bering Sea. That needs to be done again in order to try and sustain our salmon for the Yukon.

We have sacrificed a lot on the Yukon, from salmon gear to fishing times, of the whole people on Yukon River, put in some type of sacrifice in hopes of getting them back, not knowing there is another area that is not controlled, that is contributing to the decline that we see today.

Hopefully, after this, when you go back, hopefully we will see some outcomes as a result of this testimony that you will be hearing from our people. That is the only thing we have now, is hope. You are our only hope to make things change.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Oney.

Next, we have Nick Andrew.

Mr. Nick Andrew. Thank you to our Senator. I am happy you are here.

I am going to address my people and also the dignitaries who are here. We come from the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta region, the size of Oregon. Everything is up in the stratosphere here where we live. The cost of living, crime, violent crime, all the disparities in the book are here.

I am from Marshall, Alaska, on the lower Yukon River. I am a hunter, fisher, and gatherer. I was born into a culture that prioritized food and shelter. Food meant salmon. It meant smoked salmon, it meant salted salmon, salmon in the freezers. On the Yukon River, Madam Senator, the Yukon River has seen restrictions for 40 years, 40 years, that is more than half my lifetime, three-quarters of my lifetime we were put on conservation.

We bear the brunt of the conservation. We, the end users, the little people, the people that matter, have been silenced, we have been ignored, we have been marginalized by the very government that is here to protect our interests as citizens of the United States of America.

People, in my village, the fish camps are empty. The cultural activity that involved family is gone, meaning cutting salmon, preparing salmon, spending time with family, sharing with the elders. That has been broken.

There was a time our world was complete, when the rivers were teeming with salmon, on both rivers. Our people were happy. Not only the people, but the animals that rely on the salmon also were happy.

We need some answers. We need to be heard. We cannot accept this as a government formality for turning a deaf ear on the poor.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. The next three individuals are Tim Andrew, from Bethel and Marshall, Jim Simon from Salcha, and then Martin Andrew from Kwethluk.

I would remind everyone again, keep the mic as close to your mouth as you are comfortable, and if you wish to add additional comments to your testimony, the room in the back where Cordelia is is where you can go to supplement.

Mr. Andrew?

Mr. Tim Andrew. Thank you, Senator, and welcome to the Committee on Indian Affairs. I wish the remainder were here to listen to the heartbeat of the people of the region, the people of the village, people who have experienced these very critical crashes that we have seen in our salmon.

Within the people that I have seen up here in the committee, I have seen [phrase in Native tongue], I have seen [phrase in Native tongue], I have seen [phrase in Native tongue], I have seen [phrase in Native tongue], all these values that people are fighting for to retain our salmon, retain our cultural way of life, return to sharing our salmon that we harvest with our elders, with the people that we feed.

This past summer, I was at home in the community of Marshall, attending my son's funeral. The fishermen or the tribe applied for a harvest permit. They were only allowed five salmon to feed the entire people, people that were coming into his house, and other guests from other villages. We had to share those five salmon, and they were small fall chum.

Meanwhile, the waste continues. All we want to do is accommodate our guests, all we want to do is feed our families, all we want to do is continue with our ceremonies, the beat of the drum is common throughout the entire area. The guy from Eagle, and the guy from the Kawerak area, the lady from Angoon, and all the Native people in Alaska want to continue to beat that drum, beat that drum of sharing our salmon resources.

Like the late Andy Parker said from St. Mary's, subsistence without ceremony is just food. Without the first catch, without the first catch of the salmon, without the first catch of the moose, without the ceremonies that we continue, we beat the drum, and it is just food. So the cultural component and the importance of harvesting salmon is what defines us.

As Chief Seattle said, I believe it was Chief Seattle, when you cut down the last tree, when you take the last gold out of the land, when you take the last tree, when you take the last salmon, you can never eat money.

We want our salmon. We want an end to this going in one ear and out the other.

I see that my time is up. Thank you, Senator.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Andrew.

Next, Jim Simon, from Salcha.

Mr. SIMON. Thank you very much, Senator Murkowski, and the remainder of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

My name is Dr. Jim Simon. I am a consultant with the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Ahtna Inter-Tribal Resource Commission, and Tanana Chiefs Conference.

But just speaking on my own behalf, my family is originally from the Ahtna region, for multiple generations, not Natives. Just growing up with the subsistence litigation that began there in the 1980s turned into me pursuing a whole career in trying to defend, restore, and protect tribal hunting and fishing rights.

I spent 14 years running the Subsistence Division for the Arctic Yukon Kuskokwim region as well, with Tim and others on the Arctic Yukon Kuskokwim Sustainable Salmon Initiative. I want to share some thoughts with the committee.

It seems the State and Federal agencies are always 10 to 20 years behind indigenous knowledge. I remember more than 20 years ago, when I went to the Department of Fish and Game, people along the Yukon talking about the declining size of fish, the change in their shape and morphology, suggesting that something was happening in the ocean, decades ago.

Now, that is why we are hearing so much about research. The research should have been decades ago. Now we need action.

There were so many good discussions by your panelists, your invited speakers today. I think there is an interesting report that

was published last year called Bridges to a New Era Part 2: a Report on the Past, Present and Potential Future of Tribal Co-Management on Federal Public Lands in Alaska, by Professors Monte Mills and Martin Nie, which I encourage the committee to investigate. My reading of that report basically says we don't need additional acts of Congress to implement tribal co-management and co-stewardship on Federal public lands in Alaska. The road map is already present.

I want to also share some observations about escapement. It is a real pleasure to work as a consultant to the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. I think what they are demonstrating in managing alongside the Federal Government, the Federal waters of the Kuskokwim, has demonstrated that in the past 10 years, from 2013 to 2022, this drainage-wide escapement goal for Chinook salmon has been met 90 percent of the time. The one year that it wasn't matched was in 2013, when the State of Alaska was still managing the run.

So the Commission's co-management, 100 percent escapement goals met, whereas the State ranges from 40 to 60 percent across the State. Thank you. I have so much more to say, but thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Simon.

Next, we have Martin Andrew from Kwethluk.

Mr. Martin Andrew. Good afternoon. First, I would like to welcome you to the Yup'ik and Cup'ik lands in the western region. We are here addressing Arctic, Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers in regard to our salmon.

This past summer, me and my wife, with the was little opportunities that we had for salmon fishing, we also provided for four other families that we share, because that is a large part of our culture, sharing. It brought back, looking at my four- and five-year-old grandsons as they were helping us, hanging up some smoked jerky on the drying racks, that brought me back to the very same age when my parents instilled in me those same values. I just wanted to share that before I said my next piece.

Over this past year, as we all know, at the Board of Fish meeting, we have heard the outcry from the regions. When the salmon stock of fish and/or game, when the surplus, when the populations are getting low, I just wanted to point out, and it is also in the statutes, that all other consumptive uses are to be stopped. Lastly, the subsistence preference would be tapped into last.

But we all know that it is backwards. I for one as a parent, grandparent, provider of salmon not, only to my family and our extended family, I want you to look into that. That is coming from near and dear, from my heart.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Andrew.

The next three in line are Earl Samuels, from Napaskiak, Joseph Asuluk from Toksook Bay, and Joseph Joseph from Kongiganak.

Mr. SAMUELS. Thank you. Welcome. I will get right to the point.

I would like to say before I came over here, I asked people, they said, where are you going, I said, I am going over to a fish meeting;

you are going to be wasting your time. We go to meeting after meeting and meeting, we don't see the product as yet.

Area M was mentioned, yes, we went to that, we voiced our concerns, but now I have go back to old Harold Sparck days, we don't have representation down in Area M. When I went down to the meeting, I recognized it. It took us 40 years to realize that.

YK, Kuskokwim, up north, lack of representation in Area M. Except the interception pressure that affects all of us, all up and down both rivers and up and towards Nome and Kotzebue.

I want to say, to add to those regulated groups, instead of two members, add a member from the lower Yukon, lower Kuskokwim, and the Nome and Kotzebue area, to the North Pacific Group, that we have equal voice across, that we have a say. Right now we don't have a say. Even on the Fish and Game Board, we have lost out by one vote. Made me realize that we are in trouble out here.

Back in 2007, when we first started learning about the bycatch, I got a phone call from Dillingham, bycatch number was high, almost 80,000 that year, in five years, you guys are going to have a tough year, you are going to struggle. Five years came along, sure enough we had that salmon crash. Bycatch makes a difference out here.

I am not a scientist; we didn't go to school. Traditional knowledge came in. That was the question. But sometimes I feel traditional knowledge is a value to be in these meetings, but we are not, because we are not scientists, we didn't go to school, we didn't go to college. We learned from our elders. That is our traditional knowledge, and that could be used a little bit more.

The frozen fish, I feel sorry for you guys out in the Yukon. Try to thaw out a salmon and try to make it into dried fish. It is almost difficult, but it is a meal. We are happy. We won't be able to make the fish do, it deteriorates badly.

When we were down there at Area M, people from there wanted to give us fish, we said no, we can't. But the time it gets to region, and we are thankful, it deteriorates too much, sometimes inedible.

Trawlers were mentioned. I hope we can [indiscernible] this here or take us back. If you look at the marine mammals, two trawlers came into Kuskokwim Bay at a time of conservation. Thirty miles from Queen??, 30 miles from Queen??, Kipnuk, they are raking the bottom. Our elders used to tell us, watch the bottom of the ocean. That is where the small fish will eat. The trawlers are destroying that out here.

Back in the early 1990s, we had a trawler off the cost of Kipnuk, once a thriving halibut fishing ground. They came in, you could see the barge from the village, the trawler. The following year, no more halibut. It is going to be the same effect again, rake out the bottom. It takes in everything.

If you look at the catch we used, harvesting king salmon last year, just barely made 30,000. To average that out to 20 pounds of fish if we are lucky. That is almost 600,000 pounds of salmon.

There is billions of waste. That doesn't include the marine mammals that are out there, seals, salmon, whatever is in the ocean, they are also being affected.

Kodiak, look at those guys. What is happening to the [indiscernible] crab? Last year, they couldn't even have a season. It is affecting that, everything out there, the ocean is changing.

I wanted to mention, when I listened to this panel right out here, before those regulations go any further, this is the group that they have to go through first. If they vote on something, let this group do the final approval of that vote.

Our elders used to say, don't leave this building until you figure it out. Lock that door until you figure it out. When we go to the meetings, there is no locked door. We just listen. In one ear, and out the other. Like Fritz said, hopefully something will come out of this.

Co-management was mentioned. Sure, we can co-manage. But we are an overly regulated people. They tell us when we can fish, tell us when we get up, tell us when to go to the bathroom. We are over-regulated. Regulated by the State, regulated by the Federal guys. Maybe they need to put their heads together and makes themselves a co-management group themselves. Because they are managing the same people, us, the same salmon. The same way with every other every other game.

It is that way with moose, too. We are regulated on the moose. Elders tell us too, be careful. If you argue too much or fight about it, there is going to be none. And that is what we see now. We are playing catch-up now. Yukon River lost their ability to go out, Kuskokwim is next.

When I saw the Area M people testify, that reminded me of back when we once had a thriving king salmon season on the river. We fought to try to keep it. We lost. We have been a conservative people here for over 40 years to watch the salmon to come back. Every year, we hope it comes back. There is no king salmon yet.

One year I remember, no fish for king. They let us focus on the chum, chum that once the old-timers fed to their dogs. Sure, we didn't like it, but we adapted. We can learn. Even the chum was valuable, there is cultural and spiritual value to the chum. That was almost gone. Last year we got a few.

Because of the Area M late start-out, I am hearing it started late, they fought for their three openings for a week and they got it. Because of that delay, we profited, benefited from that fishing. We caught a little bit more salmon than we did in the past.

So thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Joseph Asuluk.

Mr. ASULUK. I am going to speak my own language. Quyana.

[Speaking in Native tongue.]

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Asuluk.

Joseph Joseph, from Kongiganak.

Mr. JOSEPH. Thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to stand before you, Senator Murkowski.

The truth of the matter is whether we like it or not, as Alaska Natives, we, you and I, are the most regulated people in the world. You and I, we are the most regulated people in the world.

What I would like to say to Senator Murkowski, on the Federal side and on the State side, before this civil unrest gets to the next

level, there needs to be stricter regulations for the intercept fisheries and the bycatch fisheries. Because if this civil unrest gets to the next level, it is going to be messy.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. The next three individuals are Nathaniel Amdur-Clark from Anchorage, followed by Stanislaus Sheppard, Mountain Village, and Myron Naneng, here in Bethel.

Mr. Amdur-Clark. Good afternoon, Senator.

Nathaniel Amdur-Clark, I am an attorney at Sonosky, Chambers, and outside counsel for the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

I would like to take a moment to speak with you a little bit from your oversight role over Federal agencies that are helping to regulate the fishing, especially on the Kuskokwim. Often, folks get up here to tell you about all the things that are going wrong. Today I get to talk for just a moment about something that went right.

I think you probably know some of this back story, or maybe even all of it. During the fishing season of 2021, the State started doing a whole bunch of things that were blatantly illegal, including telling people to fish when it was illegal under Federal law for them to do so.

For years, the Federal agencies have often stood back and taken the route of going along to get along. This is a case where the Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Justice didn't do that. They filed suit on behalf of the Federal Government and also the people of Alaska in order to protect the rural subsistence priority and the continued viability of the rural subsistence priority on the Kuskokwim and by extension, the rest of the State.

In your conversations with the folks from the agencies, I hope that you can use your place to say thank you, and to provide support for the continued doing the right thing by those agencies, including in the expansion and the ways that have been spoken about so eloquently by everyone who has spoken much better than I have today.

Thank you for the time. I appreciate it.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Nathaniel.

Stanislaus Sheppard, from Mountain Village.

Mr. SHEPPARD. Good evening, Senator Lisa Murkowski.

[Speaking in Native tongue.]

My name is Stanislaus Sheppard. I was born and raised in the Lower Yukon Mountain Village. I was raised in the subsistence way of lifestyle. My Eskimo name is [phrase in Native tongue].

The majority of the speakers up here already spoke up to what I was thinking of speaking about. As I am getting older, my focus is on fighting for our subsistence. Back in 1986, the late Harry Wilde, Sr., when I got onto the tribal council, he pulled me aside, and he said, I am going to train you, teach you how to fight for subsistence, because in your lifetime, you guys are going to have this big trend of no subsistence. Sure enough, we are living that right now.

But along that scenario, he said the most important thing, and the majority of my classmates and the younger generation never



really paid attention to what is very important. I am on these different committees, which I will not name because I am speaking on my behalf. [Phrase in Native tongue.] I am making sure the elder understands.

Harry went down to fish [indiscernible], he told me, I am going to teach you how to fight for subsistence. It is very important. Because later on, when I was on that council, we had a salmon crash in the Yukon River. And the late representatives, the people that go up and testify that were on these committees, the late John Hanson, Harry Wilde, the late Johnny Thompson, and Stan from Ketchikan, they fought to close, to reduce Area M False Pass. I didn't know what they did, but it worked.

Soon after, two years after [indiscernible], we had our salmon coming back. So when this past spring, I went to go testify at the Board of Game. Everybody, over 300 people were there to testify for Proposal 140 to reduce the fishing in Area M False Pass. But everybody was thinking, in that area, was thinking we are not going to be able to fish. No, it is just to reduce your hours, to allow the salmon, which is proven Scientifically that they come by False Pass and come up to Norton Sound, Yukon, Kuskokwim.

So after that proposal was thrown down, I attended the North Pacific Fishery meetings, and I am trying to make this fast. There was little more than half the testifying people that were there at the Board of Fish. They made their point across, reason being that after all the testimony was said, Mr. Chairman was sitting there, we all know how they sit, looking at the crowd, you guys would be looking at the board right here.

Mr. Chairman, the one that was sitting on the left side of him spoke to everybody, everybody that attended the North Pacific meeting. He acknowledged, and I wanted to come up and add Senator Lisa Murkowski's wording when she said crisis. That North Pacific Council member addressed the public, or the people that were there. He said, it seems to me that the Yukon is in a humanitarian crisis. And yet he made the board understand that humanitarian crisis needs action to be taken. No action has been taken ever since that.

My time is up. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Shepperd.

Myron Neneng is next.

Mr. NENENG. Good afternoon, Senator Murkowski and welcome to Bethel.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you.

Mr. NENENG. It seems like back in 1997 I spoke to your dad and got our subsistence hunting for spring hunting of migratory birds. Our subsistence rights were recognized. I never had an opportunity to thank your dad, but today we are talking about another issue that is very important to our people.

My name is Myron Neneng. I am originally from the village of Hooper Bay out on the coast. I fished on the Yukon commercially as well as subsistence. I fished here on the Kuskokwim, and I have even gone out to Kuskokwim Bay for subsistence fishing.

One of the things that was raised today was that the treaty obligation that probably many of our people on the Yukon as well as

the Kuskokwim don't realize exists today, the Yukon, Canada king salmon, Chinook salmon escapement objective. That was done back in 1996. Every year since that time, with the number that at one time was 75,000 has been reduced down to about 45,000, and has not been met for a substantial period of time.

When the issue was first raised, I asked the commission of Fish and Game at that time and my co-negotiators, I think we ought to deal with the in-State fishery concerns first before we go to negotiate with another country. A week later, I got a letter from the commissioner of Fish and Game, thank you for your service, but your services are no longer needed.

Because we have had this decline of salmon, salmon stops on the Yukon as well as the Kuskokwim since the 1990s. I remember we have had to have a few commercial fishery disaster declarations, working with Senator Stevens. He appropriated money, money that was used for studies, allocated to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I have not seen anything regarding the results of those studies that were done back then. Nothing.

On the inter-country treaty that currently exists on the Yukon River, the people on the Yukon as well as on the coast bear the burden of conservation to try and meet the escapement objective. Are the bycatch included? No. Is bycatch or interception down in Area M included? No. Because there were representatives from the Yukon that were considered to be part of the State of Alaska negotiating team.

And here we are today, whatever we provided in terms of testimony to the Board of Fish, North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, every time we raised a concern about declining salmon runs on the Yukon and the Kuskokwim, the first response that we get from both of those entities, North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and State of Alaska, their response is anecdotal, we didn't have time for a study to be done by someone who may have had a degree, but I wouldn't say what kind of degree.

Today, we are in this situation that needs to be addressed. North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, Department of Commerce, need to be included in that treaty agreement to reduce that bycatch. State of Alaska, Area M fisheries, also has to be included in that treaty agreement. Because the burden of conservation is borne primarily by those who live along the coast, like my home village of Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, Chevak, and the whole river system of the Yukon River.

None of those other areas that we know that intersect that are doing the bycatch are not included. What is wrong with that scenario?

The people that have always been asked to bear the burden of conservation have been us, the Yup'iks, Cup'iks, Athabascans that live out here in western Alaska and even up north, our friends up north in Norton Sound. We are the ones that have had to bear that burden of conservation, and I hope Senator, that we have an opportunity to do something about this, either by legislation or amending that treaty to have them all included.

Thank you very much.  
[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. The next three individuals on the list are Eliza Mark, Amy Sparck, and Nikki Pollock.

Ms. MARK. Thank you, Senator Murkowski. I am Eliza. [Greeting in Native tongue.]

I have a question about, in Japan, is there like a plant, something like that that affected the salmon, I think?

Senator MURKOWSKI. I think, Eliza, you are referring to the Fukushima nuclear plant that was taken out in the typhoon years ago. There is an issue now with regard to the stored water from the cleanup of that being released. I believe that is what you are speaking to.

Ms. MARK. Yes. Thank you. Qu yana.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Amy Sparck.

Ms. SPARCK. [Greeting in Native tongue]. My name is Amy Sparck, daughter of Lucy Sparck, Cup'ik of Chevak, and the late Harold Sparck of Baltimore.

It is so great to be known this way, by fellow Natives, by who your parents are. In Alaska, it is great to know each other, because our parents know each other. I worked for Lisa's dad at the Senate Energy Subcommittee years ago.

Today, I work at the Bering Sea Fishermen's Association as Executive Director representing 128 communities in the Kuskokwim, Yukon, and Norton Sound region. Being fairly certain that you understand the impacts of our historic salmon crashes, I can share what I hope to be some steps toward solutions for restoration and fisheries management. We need equal decision-making representation in Federal fisheries management, in this case the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. The advisory and appeals process is essentially titular and ineffectual.

We need co-management with tribes and full dedicated funding. Gravel to Gravel is a good start, a multi-agency agreement with the Department of Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and BLM and tribes.

Stop allowing the status quo so as to not affect industry harvest to the extent practicable in fisheries management. Rather, to the extent practicable, use your plenary powers to help us find the source of our salmon crashes, and allow our fish to return from the Bering Sea and Area M using our traditional ecological and subsistence knowledge.

Do it now, because you don't want Alaska to be the next devastating American dust bowl. We can help. We are here to help, that is why we are all here. Reach out any time that you think you need any kind of unified presence with you in Washington, D.C., and we will be there.

Qu yana. Thank you for making your way to Bethel and holding this meeting here.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Amy.

Nikki Pollock.

Ms. POLLOCK. Qu yana, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment.

I want to take this moment to say qu yana to all our veterans today on Veterans Day. I also want to mention that Alaska has the

highest rate or shares of veterans, veteran residents, according to the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau at 10.1 percent. So thank you, thank you all for your service. Furthermore, Alaska Natives and American Indians serve in the U.S. Armed Services at higher rates than any other U.S. service group.

My name is Nikki Pollock. [Phrase in native tongue.] I am an ONC tribal citizen. I am Yup'ik from the river. I have a background in nursing, I graduated in 2010 through the University of Alaska as a registered nurse. I have been a lifelong Kuskokwim fisherwoman, subsistence gatherer, and I am a mother and have spent my entire life on the river, just like many of us here.

I want to speak to the disparities that are affecting our people, particularly our health and well-being. I want to talk about the amounts necessary for subsistence. This jar is what we now use to put our jarred fish weight in our families. Our fish camp alone has six families that we feed. This is a jar that we used to use about 10 years ago. We used to use larger jars. I don't have any of those anymore, because we don't use them in our family, because there is simply not enough fish to go around.

It is no surprise that there are direct correlations with health consequences and increasing insecurity for food, housing, and economics. We know through various research studies that these insecurity factors have been directly linked to the range of adverse health effects that are plaguing our tribal citizens today.

I want to speak to the disproportionate rates that our Native people, who make up less than 3 percent of the overall United States population, are experiencing at greater rates than our non-Native counterparts, and that is throughout the entire United States. That is for nine out of ten of the leading causes of death in America. Native people, American Indians, have nine out of the ten highest causes of death. We surpass them.

In 2020, there was a report that was given out by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium that created a very disparaging picture of the health of our Native people. We are experiencing higher rates of cancer, heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, mental health issues, and diabetes, compared to our non-indigenous counterparts.

Consequently, we are experiencing the physical and mental health impacts directly related to the food quality, quantity and cultural and political and economic conditions in our region. We are facing that.

It has been directly, these health issues can be directly and indirectly related to the decline in salmon.

As you heard today from many of the invited witnesses, there is a nutritional component, there is a well-being component related to our culture. We are experiencing that, which is why Alaska Native people in particular from our region are experiencing significantly greater health disparities and poorer outcomes, which is directly related to our fish.

Thank you for your time.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Nikki.

Next, we will hear from Sophie Swope, from Bethel, Nels Alexie, and Charlie Jacob [phonetically] from Napaskiak.

Ms. SWOPE. Thank you so much. My name is Sophie Swope. I am an activist for the people here in [Native phrase]. I sit on the tribal council as well as the City of Bethel's council, and I serve as the vice mayor. I think this is a very important setting for us to come and share, have discourse on something that creates the culture of who we are and the mentality we hold as Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Athabascan people. Thank you for holding this hearing, Senator Murkowski.

We have heard from a large range of leaders, and you can see that this issue has a complexity that is all-encompassing. I would first like to note that the City of Bethel has seen economic impacts like the historical salmon declines. I am sure that touches every community in the region besides Bethel.

Before I go into something that I am very passionate about, I heard this on the radio by Evon Waska, and I am very happy that I was able to hear this. He mentioned that the pure fact that we are indigenous people, limited in our subsistence fishing and ability to go out and provide food for ourselves, while out on the ocean, they have no restrictions. They are able, well, there are restrictions, but they are beyond what they should be.

That is a form of discrimination that goes against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Discrimination not only of race, but our religion. One way, Our way of life, something that must be understood by both Congress, Department of Interior, NOAA, and the Department of Commerce. So I hope that can go forward and be shared, that it is that important.

Being salmon people and the protection of these resources to maintain the richness is what makes us, what is our State's slogan, North to the Future. It is not the oil. Tulsa, Oklahoma already pioneered that. It is not the gold, that led to colonization of the Country. We are north to the future because we have the majority of the Nation's tribes, tribes who still have wild, free-flowing rivers and salmon still coursing in that scene. We hold to the way of life that a majority of the Nation has lost touch with. It is up to us to uphold that and share it back with the rest of our people in our Nation. It is a way of life that we should all be holding.

So as we look forward, I think it is important that we look at the mercury content that will be coming with the development of Donlin gold, and all that will come with that. There is a wide scale probability, 33 percent to 66 percent probability of a small but important spike in mercury concentrations. That is a neurotoxin. What would it do to people?

Just before I stop here, there is an increase in morbidity and mortality related to psychosocial distress, such as depression, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, and changes to family structure, with a likelihood of 66 to 90 percent.

With all of this in mind, I really hope that we could move forward with a just path and that the tribes are listened to and heard, and their opposition to this project as a majority of the tribes are opposed.

I have written a letter to hand out to you, Senator Lisa Murkowski. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Sophie.

Next, we have Nels Alexie.

Mr. ALEXIE. [Greeting in Native tongue.] I am going to have a fairy story, but thank you so much for those who have shown your support to our people, to ourselves. First, this is about the history, the historic salmon declines. Before that, you may not believe it but if you don't want to believe me, don't believe me.

There was a fish and its name was Kuputkuk [phonetically]. People used to use it for a fire starter. Kuputkuk is the title of the story. Kuputkuk was mis-used by my own people. This was years ago before I was even born. I guess no one, a Native person in this room, has heard the story about it. It was mis-used; that is why it disappeared. And the people were warned. They did not listen.

My fish rack, I did not hang anything on my fish rack last summer, not a bit. And I am getting clumsy, too.

The openings and the hours, I want to use a [indiscernible] word, were just like feathers. On certain days, certain hours I cannot go fishing. That is why I cannot get fish to fill up my rack.

On the closures, when it is closed, we are told, do not fish. But there are some other species that we would like to catch besides chums or kings. And when I asked, can I go fishing, they say no, [indiscernible].

So if there is a closing for certain species, there should be, still the river should be open to get our fish besides chum and the king. And the declines, chums were going up, up and down, they will disappear. My own people have told me chums are going to decline. They will disappear. But they have come back.

But even that happens, if you keep quiet, not fight over with it, it may come back quicker. Some of the Native people may have heard about that. [Phrase in Native tongue], that is what we are doing right now, we are crying about the salmon, even though we laugh and talk about it, we are crying, making a loud noise, preachy noise. Back in the 1950s, silvers were declining. I did not know it was declining.

The old lady came in and she said, [phrase in Native tongue], James, cut more salmon this morning, fill up a cup. And that was James [indiscernible]. I have seen that. And then 12-mile border and Russian ships being chained down at the bay. When they pushed off, we had more fish coming in. That is the time when Ted Stevens shipped them out, 200 miles out.

I am over time. Thank you for this day. And some day I will tell you a story.

[Laughter, applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Alexie.

Next up, we have Carlie Jacob from Napaskiak.

Mr. JACOB. I have a question to ask. First, my name is Carlie Jacob from Napaskiak. I am a member of the tribal council. And like everybody else, I am a subsistence gatherer.

I have traveled four to five miles round trip upriver to harvest moose. I traveled 200 miles round trip to Yukon to harvest moose because of lack of openings. I started fishing when I was seven years old, with my grandfather and my father. They taught me the difference between right and wrong, how to survive, and how to gather and harvest. I am teaching my children and my grandchildren the same thing like my grandfather taught me.

Back in my teenage years, growing up, when I started fishing, I was on my own. I had no liberties, no one telling me what not to get, what not to do, all that, before [indiscernible]. But I am not used to being in a big crowd like this, bear with me.

There is a question I would like to ask, I don't know where it came from. But I suppose Fish and Game brought this up to the management, and the management were like, okay, let him start using four-inch fish net. Is using four-inch fish net hurting or damaging or injuring salmon? So I am asking to discontinue using four-inch nets. Where I am from, downriver, Napaskiak, that river out there my fishing area. Lots of people come, and they harvest fish [indiscernible]. Discontinue using four-inch nets. Discontinue it.

I too am having enough of this. I want to fill up my rack, just like everyone else. Back in my teenage years, I filled up the rack on my own, two families I do. This is a hardship. Two families. Imagine me fishing for two families for myself, my family, and the other family.

We are having a lack of openings, lack of hours. We need more time. I need more time and I need more days to harvest salmon for myself and the other families.

Discontinue using four-inch nets. Stop it. They are killing my salmon out there. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

Next, we have Laureli Ivanoff from Unalakleet, Dora Wassillie from Kasigluk, and then Daniel Nelson from Napakiak.

Ms. IVANOFF. Hello, Senator Murkowski, and to the committee members. I am Laureli Ivanoff. I am Inupiaq and Yup'ik from Unalakleet. I continue to make my home there.

I am the executive director for Native Peoples Action, and we are a statewide advocacy group working to protect our Alaska Native hunting, fishing and harvesting rights.

The traditional harvesting culture in Alaska Native communities remains really strong. It is vibrant and necessary, not only for a livelihood, but for our health, sense of identity and the food sovereignty we rely upon to pass down a way of life central to who we are as indigenous Alaskans.

The rivers, the land and the Bering Sea ecosystem are what uphold our values that are central to our identities as Alaska Natives. The imbalance of the ecosystem and the decline in salmon throughout the AYK threatens our food sovereignty, our food security, and the culture that has sustained who we are through a tumultuous history of colonization. Most of us in this room can agree that current fisheries management structures do not honor our subsistence rights, and are unwilling to address the salmon crisis.

Our pleas for a meaningful bycatch avoidance in the Federal Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska trawl fishery fall on deaf ears, and it is no wonder. A great environmental and social injustice is the fact that the Federal fisheries fall under the Department of Commerce, and are not managed for sustainability. So the halibut, the sea lions, whales, salmon and all species incidentally caught as bycatch are not seen as species we should all respect, but are simply seen as collateral damage in a \$1.3 billion fishery.

Alaska Native tribes need representation on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. Not giving us a place is continuing the dark legacy of eco-colonialism.

This reality is unjust, not simply for Alaska Natives communities, whose economies and ways of life are centered around the health of the land and waters, but it is unjust for the species that rely on balance, that rely on knowledge and a mindset that is currently missing in western science and the current management systems.

It is so very clear to me that the systems today need a paradigm shift. Relationships of respect and reciprocity with the land, waters, and the species we rely upon must be incorporated in all areas of management.

But for now, I would like to highlight the fact that the State of Alaska has at every possible turn worked against federally protecting hunting, fishing, and harvesting rights. The State is once again trying to overturn the Katie John line of cases, which would erase the Federal subsistence priority for Native residents.

Congress needs to amend ANILCA to protect once and for all Alaska Native rural subsistence hunting and fishing rights and ensure our people's ability to co-manage these resources.

Thank you. Quyana for your time and consideration.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Quyana, thank you, Laureli.

Next, we have Dora Wassillie.

Ms. WASSILLIE. Good evening. First, I would like to thank our Creator for us to get together here. To put myself aside, I would like to express that subsistence way of living with our regulation.

I have always put God first in everything, in our meetings, at home, or reaching out anywhere in the world. That is all I need to say. And always have faith, hope, and trust [indiscernible] with way of our believing. And always pray for our future, for our grandchildren, great grandchildren, and for all people. We all matter. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Dora.

Next, we have Daniel Nelson from Napakiak.

Mr. NELSON. My name is Daniel Nelson. I have grown up shooting, and I have a hearing problem. And now after I got the slight pneumonia, it affects my body, like shaking, and sometimes it affects my, what I am talking about.

But I am glad to attend, and welcome, Lisa Murkowski. First, I would like to ask you if you have a Yup'ik name?

Senator MURKOWSKI. I have a Tlingit name, Aan shaawutk'i. I do not have a Yup'ik name.

Mr. NELSON. I was going to say, if you do not have a Yup'ik name, maybe [phrase in Native tongue] will be fine, Washington, D.C.

First of all, we have enough facts and statistics on this Area M fishery. Matter of fact, the senior elder who talked, who said enough is enough, I think enough is enough. We have been on this fishing closure for some 20 years, and the villages around the Yukon and Kuskokwim are cooperating. When they say no fishing, we don't fish.



Even though we are not fishing, this Area M, which is the False Pass, those guys out there are making, they are hardly getting nothing. Let me get my notes.

So what I was thinking is there are a lot of villages in this Kuskokwim River and Yukon River, and up the Kawerak River. There are lots, even up past this international river we call Yukon River, Canadian people. Canadian Yup'ik, I think they are experiencing this, some collapse restrictions.

So what I was thinking, because we got in the facts that a lot of permit holders in the Yukon and Kuskokwim, in the past 20 years we never fished to make money out of this river in Yukon right now. This Area M, they are fishing and making money.

I think it is not very fair. Because one time Fish and Game guys came to my village, Napakiak, check if the fish numbers were dropping. The first to drop is commercial fishing. But the migratory salmon route is through False Pass. Everybody knows that.

Then the facts are like I mentioned earlier, when State or Federal closes this river for no fishing, we don't go out and fish. That is what we do.

Then there are a lot of numbers and complaints and resolutions. I think this Federal Government, I think it is time to—it was my idea to close that Area M fishery for five years. The reason I picked five years is according to the Fish and Game biologist, the fries that come out of this river to the ocean to grow up, they spend five years out there in the ocean until they return to our river to spawn again. But returning, I believe they are picked up at Area M.

There are two rivers, I know, like [indiscernible] down there. That is District Five. Because the tribal government controls the Anishka [phonetically] River, no sports fishing. Nobody's going in there to go picnic, with a rod and reel and catching all the fish or trying to find gold. They have good restrictions on that river.

So as this Bristol bay, they have a clean river, they have good control of the river, not to let outside people come in and make too many messes. The one thing that surprised me is that salmon and chum are declining. Last year, they had a record number of fish pulled in, commercially, commercial fishing. I might kind of work, work around why salmon are declining in number, but the reds are just zooming up in the Bristol bay, in record numbers.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Nelson.

Mr. NELSON. Yes. So that goes along with snow crab, out in the ocean. I don't know where the snow crab are disappearing. So what do you think the Feds can do to close Area M for five years? In five years, first, second, third, fourth and fifth, if you close that Area M we are going to see the true numbers of fish coming up the rivers, rather than the guesses. Then if it is truly Area M, we can get more chum swimming up the rivers like Yukon and Kuskokwim, even Norton Sound. If that happens, let's see the Area M closed.

Last of all, this global warming is getting worse. It is going to get worse every year. It affects all the animals on the land, and the villages are sinking; permafrost is sinking. Even the waters are getting warm. That affects our salmon. They are cold-blooded.

That is all I have to say. I wish they would close that Area M for five years, and we would see the truth in five years. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for your comments.

We still have about 10 more individuals that have signed up to testify. So we will move next to Gabe Canfield, Kungunna, then Ray Watson, and it looks like Gabriel Buster from Alakanuk.

Ms. CANFIELD. Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for bringing us together today in this field hearing on the Western Alaska salmon crash. My name is Gabe Canfield. My Inupiaq name is Kungunna. I flew in from Anchorage today, but I am from all over the State. I was born in Fairbanks, and I grew up in Ketchikan, down in southeast, and my parents are from Wales in Northwest Alaska.

I am the policy coordinator for the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association, and you may also know me as a member of the third cohort of the Arctic Youth Ambassadors program. I want to take a moment and call attention to the fact that we have had little youth representation thus far at this testimony.

We see way too often that youth are almost entirely shut out from spaces, whether they are not invited or the space is too intimidating. We want to hear more youth voices in spaces like this, because this is youth's future. We are going to be dealing with this salmon crash for years into the future when we go into management situations. I want to make sure that we have some youth representation when we go forward in that.

Given that, I would like to take this time to call attention to the cost that this salmon crisis has brought forth to our community members of all ages. I don't mean to bring these forward to be pessimistic, but to paint a full picture of some of the effects that I have seen in my short time in the role of policy coordinator.

The first thing that we have seen here from this crisis is the physical effects, the actual, tangible results of not having salmon in our rivers. We don't see birds, bears, wolves, and animals alongside the banks of our rivers whenever there is a salmon crash. We don't see our neighbors at fish camps, and we don't see our children [indiscernible] fish. We don't see the salmon's bright bellies, and we don't see the smoke rising from the smokehouse and the scent of dried fish filling the air. We don't see the kings, chums, and cohos that have been coming for 100 generations or more.

We can see the cultural costs and impacts of this. We see less of our traditional foods in our homes, less potlachs and gatherings, less fish camps, less fish skin arts and handcrafts that we adorn throughout our lives. We see mental health impacts from not practicing our culture, and falling into harmful habits that have taken up our time in lieu of gathering our fish.

We see monetary costs in our community members, who spend their own money to get more expensive and less valuable foods. We see the cost of people who rely on their own resources to fly to Anchorage, to Juneau, Fairbanks, Washington, D.C., and beyond to testify on the loss of this incredibly important resource in the hopes of seeing some real change.

We see the cost of just trying to live our traditional ways where it takes so much more paychecks. It is almost untenable without grants or loans when gas is over \$10 a gallon in some communities. The cost of taking out our boats is almost not worth it without the chance of getting our salmon.

We can see indirect effects across our State that impacts beyond just Western Alaska and our communities. The pressure on the

Copper River salmon run from necessary reliance on fisheries outside of Western Alaska has been a documented impact. Alongside the outrage over the State of Alaska's predatory control program, when it would not be necessary with the predator's salmon subsistence be protected from exploitation in the Bering Sea.

These costs are just some examples of the huge impacts to Western Alaska that, if we don't act soon, it will not just be our community members who will be experiencing the salmon crisis, I can guarantee that there are going to be future impacts Alaska-wide. We can't even begin to imagine what those are yet.

We want to be able to see action and see our salmon come back to our rivers. Our community members have been speaking about this since the founding of YRDLA, and long before it.

Quyana for listening, and I hope that this gets to the ears of folks in D.C. I appreciate it.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Gabe. It is good to have youth representation. I appreciate that.

Ray Watson.

Mr. WATSON. Welcome, Senator.

I just wanted to talk about maybe some things that need to happen. You have heard from the leadership here of what has happened. And we know that, in 2015 I am the one who called a meeting. I am the one who called a meeting in June, 2015. Myron was there, I was there, in which the result was the Fish Commission. That was the result of people coming together and trying to find a solution to an existing problem.

We thought at that time that tribal leadership, we had a tribal priority. On top of that, we had the elders. We wanted to practice our traditional ways.

It has been about eight years now, and we are still talking. That is the sad thing, we are still talking. I don't know if I will be here in eight years, but I am hoping there will be some positive results down the road.

To look at it from an empathetic perspective, you need to go back to the Senate Committee and say, this is what Ray said. This is the cultural impact. Ray said it like this. There is not going to be any Thanksgiving this year. That is what Ray said. We can't have Thanksgiving, you can't practice that culture, you get with your family, you can't have that bonding. You can't do that.

But that is exactly what is happening to our people on both rivers, the Yukon and the Kuskokwim. Let them feel that, because that is what we are feeling.

And you talk about the impacts, the mental health impacts, if you are trying to teach the younger generation about [phrase in Native tongue], growing up in fish camp, providing, cutting the fish, there is a big void there. There is a big void there, because if you don't allow the people to practice Thanksgiving, they are going to lose that, what that bonding is in family.

That is exactly what is happening. Working in the treatment center, I know I am talking to the younger generation. They don't know, because that resource doesn't exist right now. It doesn't.

Hopefully, we will come back maybe this time next year with results. That is what leaders do. We deliver, right? Come back and

say, this is what you brought to us, and this is what I have to report. That is what I hope is evolving, especially with Area M, the bycatch, all of these things. We need to have these results on record.

In closing, I would like to thank you for your support for the veterans. As a service-connected veteran I appreciate your support.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for your service, Ray.

Next, we have Gabriel Buster from Alakanuk.

Mr. BUSTER. Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for being our support. We are going to believe that.

We have to start from here and I believe, there are so many things going on right now. I believe NASA is already in our villages, in the next town of [indiscernible]. They are taking samples. If they can get some funding to do some testing, they can start from the source. We don't know what started it, but I believe it is from the big earthquake, too, it is part of that.

But we know that NASA people told us that from the air, they can see thousands of miles of debris from the washout, when the water went down from the tsunami. We know that was part of that. They told us that, and we know that. That time we asked for NASA's help, and they came.

I believe they can help us more, if they can get funding to pick up all that debris. It is hurting the sea lions, the seals, we know that, too. And probably even the fish too, we don't really know. I understand that with that being said, we need your support for funding these, I don't know if they are private companies. We know there is thousands and thousands of miles of debris from it, there is so much [indiscernible] from that disaster.

All the things that we are speaking and, it should be instead of telling you what is going on it should be [indiscernible] when there is anger, it doesn't work with love in your heart. We need to do that, so we can be heard.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Gabriel.

Next, we go to Daniel Smith, from Goodnews, Jennifer Hooper from Bethel, and then Boyd Blihovde from Anchorage.

Daniel Smith, go ahead.

Mr. SMITH. Hello, my name is Daniel Smith. I am an alcoholic. Welcome. I come from the Native village of Goodnews Bay.

I first went into recovery in 2018. Before then, I had a I had no voice, no strength. I wouldn't even have been able to come up and talk to you today until I became a recovering alcoholic. I realize that a lot of my peers, they are perishing due to their addictions to alcohol or drugs. Maybe some of them are perishing on the way to the fishing grounds or hunting grounds.

Growing up, I was always told that we were the future leaders of our village. How can we effectively lead our communities? How can we become effective teachers? How can we become effective leaders, and how can we preserve our culture and our tradition if we are drunk or in jail? That is the elephant in the room that I feel no one is talking about.

In one week, we had three boating fatalities in this region and one in Dillingham. So I didn't prepare anything to talk about, and I am hoping that our tribal leaders, the State and Federal Government will become a stronger advocate for recovery and wellness. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Daniel. I appreciate your saying that and encouraging us all in that important message.

Next is Jennifer Hooper, from Bethel.

Ms. HOOPER. Can I please pass on my time, Senator?

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Jennifer. The next is Boyd Blihovde.

Mr. BLIHOVDE. Thank you, Senator Murkowski. My name is Boyd Blihovde, I am the former refuge manager at Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, just across the street there is our office. I am currently the Gravel to Gravel coordinator in the regional office of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

There is so much I would like to say, but I decided to focus on one concern related to salmon declines. One major problem is that people who live outside this region don't acknowledge that there is a salmon crisis at all. The first step in solving a problem is admitting that there is a problem in the first place.

I wanted to acknowledge that the people here in the Kuskokwim region have known that there is a problem for many years. The Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission realized that there is a major problem with their salmon runs since as early as 2015, and they did something about it. Their locally led and tribally centered voices were the voices that led the agencies to the conservation table. Their voices led the agencies to acknowledging that there is a problem in the first place.

I want to say thanks from the bottom of my heart to the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and to all of you who live in this local area for all that you do. However, even today, in my personal opinion, there are those outside this region who don't acknowledge the salmon crisis.

I want to share a bit of a story about what happened when I got here. When I first got here in 2020, we were only concerned about Chinook salmon. Today, the people of this region suffer restrictions on not just Chinook salmon, but Chinook, chum, and even silver salmon.

The Fish and Wildlife Service recognizes more needs to be done. Therefore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regional director in Anchorage, Sara Boario, and the BLM State Director, pushed to create a new Keystone Initiative called Gravel to Gravel. We have initiated the Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative with leadership of the tribes at the center of that initiative. We recognize that this initiative won't solve all the problems related to the salmon crisis, but it will bring Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds to this region to prioritize salmon restoration, co-stewardship and ecosystem resilience.

Again, I want to thank all of you for being here and for speaking up on this issue. Thanks.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for your good work. Thank you.

Next on our list we have Alissa Nadine Rogers from Bethel.

Ms. ROGERS. Thank you, Senator Murkowski. In all due respect, I am going to pass it on to the next person behind me, then I will go next.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Kara Domnick.

Ms. DOMNICK. [Greeting in Native tongue.] My name is [phrase in Native tongue] Kara Domnick. I work for ONC Natural Resources, and I love my job. I was born and raised here in Bethel by my parents, Gerald and Rose Domnick.

For my testimony, I want to focus on the strong and important ties between mental health, our current addiction crisis, and our subsistence way of life. So I would like to share part of my personal story with all of you.

I am in my tenth year into a successful recovery from a very bad opiate addiction. My family spent tens of thousands of dollars on trying to find outside treatment that would help me, with little success.

It wasn't until I was brought back home to my community and was involved in local and culturally based recovery programs before my true recovery began. My family made a huge effort to reconnect me with my traditional ways of life during that time, and I was given the opportunity to rediscover myself and what was truly important to me. The river and the tundra became my peace. In the end, it was what made my life feel whole and meaningful again.

I may not have been here today if I didn't have that connection and access to my culture and subsistence opportunities. Our people are facing a substance abuse crisis, and many of our people believe that we need to find our own way of healing ourselves. We have one, and it is a deeper connection to our culture and our way of life. I am proof.

With the declining salmon numbers comes further separation from our culture. How is this going to affect our mental health? How much worse will it get? I fear for our people.

Salmon truly does equal life for our people, and life should be a priority, and so should our subsistence. Quyana.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you for sharing that, Kara.

Now, Alissa Nadine Rogers.

Ms. ROGERS. Thank you. First, I want to give you a hug. No one has given you a hug since we have been here.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I had a lot coming in, thank you. I love it.

Ms. ROGERS. Quyana. Veterans, thank you all for your service, and I apologize on behalf of our Country to our Vietnam vets. You are acknowledged and you are honored for your service.

I am [phrase in Native tongue] Alissa Nadine Rogers, representing the YK Delta's people and its resources. I am a Native leader in the making, following in the footsteps of my elders and our chiefs.

We are the world's largest and the United States' most sustainable resource. These standing presence in our Federal Government as the world's greatest economic GDP powered provider. Your answer is simple, Senator Murkowski. Through co-management, development of a U.S.A. government agency that is strictly dedicated to Alaska's health and well-being of our resource management, that

is governed by Alaska Natives, giving Alaska equal government power to ensure change in the right direction of managing our resources, covering resource issues from policies, fishery impacts like bycatch, erosion, suicide, health restoration, environmental conservation, mining like Donlin and Pebble, air quality, water quality, laws, regulations, ANILCA and so much more this department can provide, Senator Murkowski.

One more thing. Please immediately lower our prices in all our communities, so we can afford food and resources to replace the restricted food that we can only watch go by as our stomachs grumble, as we choose to keep our children warm and fed.

When I was a little girl, my mother used to go to bed hungry because she had to choose between keeping a roof over my head, keeping me fed, keeping me taken care of, and I would share my little piece of jello that I had every night with her, and she said no, you eat it.

Once again, Senator Murkowski, as I have asked your dad at AFN when I was 11 years old, help me end suicide. Help me protect our Native rights. Help me restore our resources for future generations. And most of all, help me save Alaska.

Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for your time, and thank you for coming to Bethel.

[Applause.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Alissa. Very powerful and a very fitting way to end the public testimony. Those are all the names that have signed up to present today.

I want to share with you my deep appreciation. For some of you comments that you shared are very deeply personal. That you were willing to share them today is very meaningful, know that.

Know also that as I sit and I take notes, and think about next steps, because I don't want you to feel that this afternoon was a waste of your time, that it was just yet one more opportunity to say something that was going to go in one ear and out the other.

I heard that. I heard that and I carry that responsibility with me.

I have actually been challenged on this, on even having this field hearing here in Bethel. I have been challenged from others who have said, well, if you go and listen, you might then own the problem. That is right. You have elected me to represent you and do a hard job. And part of that hard job is trying to navigate some of what we have heard today.

So believe me, this is not a check the box. This is not something that I had to do. This is something that I want to do, because I hear you. And I know, I know the comment that was made just a little bit ago by Boyd, who mentioned that there are a lot of people outside the who perhaps don't understand or acknowledge the crisis that you are feeling within this region, and how it is impacting you. So part of my job is to convey the urgency here.

One of the other things that I have also heard is that the traditional knowledge that you bring to the table has led long before much of the science or the actual management actions that come, because again, your people who have lived, not only in the region now, but you have listened to your parents and your grandparents

about what was in place before, what they saw, what you are now seeing, and what you can project out.

We need to be paying attention to that aspect of knowledge that you bring to the table. That is as key as anybody with a Ph.D. who is studying fisheries management.

So you have given me a great deal to consider here today, along with my staff. I want to be able to report back, that was another challenge that was just mentioned, report back. That is your job as an elected leader. And I may report back and say, we haven't made progress in this area, or maybe that direction was not where we needed to go. But I owe it to those of you who have come, those of you who have spoken, those who have just listened. But those who are living with the reality that your way of life is being threatened right now.

As Vivian reminded us all at the beginning, your way of life matters. So know that I carry that with me back to Washington, D.C. when I go back to work there on Monday.

Thank you for the time that you have given me, and know that together, we have some work to do. Thank you very much for your time.

With that, the Committee is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at the hearing and listening session were adjourned.]

### **Additional Statements for the Record**

#### **STATEMENT OF STANISLAUS SHEPPARD**

Mr. SHEPPARD. My name is Stanislaus Sheppard. I was born and raised in Mountain Village on the lower Yukon. I sit on the tribal council and many different other committees.

I spoke earlier about that we had our salmon crash in the 1980s, mid to early 1980s, maybe. And when we had the salmon crash, the previous people that were advocating for the Yukon River, the late Harry Wilde, the late John Hanson, the late Johnny Thompson and a couple other more that I don't really recall their names, they fought with the Board of Game and Board of Fish and other entities that had particular ability to control the pollock fishery, Pollocks Pass in Area M.

They somehow managed to close that fishing area, or reduce the hours for a period of a year maybe. Then after that, about two years later, we started seeing more salmon returning back to the river.

The difference between then and now, when then it was automatically reduced, the fishing, so that salmon were allowed to pass on their migration at the False Pass Area M to the Bristol Bay, Kuskokwim, Yukon, and Norton Sound, automatically they reduced it. Compared to nowadays, four or almost five years now, when asked to put the same restrictions back then in the 1980s, now because of the money that the pollock fishery makes, and the money that False Pass and Area M makes, the percentage of fishermen that do the most fishing, there are set nets, there is drifting, and there is purse seine fishing.

The purse seine fishing is the one that is doing the most damage. Because a person from Chignik over there are the Board of Fish



meeting last fall, last spring, he said the purse seine fishermen are doing the majority of the damage, interception, chum chucking, and not only that, that the majority, maybe 80 percent of the purse seine fishermen are from the lower 48.

So they have to try and do the same actions as they did back in the 1980s right now. The big difference right now is that the Board of Fish, the North Pacific Fisheries, the False Pass Area M, they are not taking any action to reduce fishing in the pollock fishery.

The only thing that they are doing is, we need more studies, can you do studies, while they continue to intercept the fish, chum chucking, while pollock fishing continues to keep going, and then this bycatch salmon. I don't see why they couldn't reduce the time, and pollock fishery have an A season and B season.

When I went to the North Pacific Fisheries Council meeting in Nome about 10 years ago, 11 years ago, they gave this report on B season and A season. I think it was in October, November, December, November and December were the highest bycatch that was recorded in the two months, November and December. When I testified, I said, wouldn't it make sense if they reduced the pollock fishing in November and December, when their bycatch is the highest.

I think they took a little action on that and said they reduced, but I think they are back up to that point of not really having any restrictions in the month of November and December.

So what I think would make it work right now, instead of department and all these other organizations that have control over the pollock fishery and False Pass and Area M to reduce the fishing while the study is being conducted. A majority of the answers they provide to the people that testify is that global warming, ocean temperature rising, there were three major definitions they gave and the two most important ones were global warming and warming of the ocean temps.

Thank you.

#### **STATEMENT OF CHRISTINA CHANGSAK**

Ms. CHANGSAK. My name is Christina Changsak. I want to add to my testimony. I forgot about the cost of living. Because in order to fish, our gas prices right now are \$7.50 a gallon. Then the cost of food has gone up and the cost of sanitary supplies also has gone up. Lack of jobs, it is hard for us to pay for gas, because we use gas to go fishing, to set net, to dip net, and to put away our harvest.

I will add that our way of life, summertime we are really active in our fishing. We don't take more than what we need. I support maybe three, four families and my kids do help us to fish. My boys help my husband set net, check net, while my girls help me to cut the fish, brine the fish and hang.

I would like to see the Yukon have even three, four, five openings next summer. That way we can have fish for our winter use. And it is a big part of our diet. I know there is a lot of stuff in the fish that is needed for our body. And I know a lack, because I noticed the change in my body, without having the fish.

Please consider that, and to talk to the Board of Fish to add a couple more people from the village areas to sit on their council.

Because they don't really know what goes on in the villages. They are mainly people that sit there from out-States or in big cities compared to us people that live locked in the little bays, where our only access is by plane in and out. So that way they could hear and see what we go through.

I think that is it.

#### STATEMENT OF SOPHIE SWOPE

Ms. SWOPE. I am Sophie Swope from Bethel, Alaska. I am continuing my testimony from earlier. I had to skip over portions due to the time limit.

It is important to look back at the historical declines. For the future, though, what is our access to salmon or better yet, what is the safety of even consuming the salmon going to look like when Donlin Gold is here developing on our salmon spawning tributaries?

I am astonished to look at the health impact assessment showing a wide scale possibility, 33 percent to 60 percent of a probability of a small but important increase in mercury concentrations in our hair, if our consumption patterns of fish do not change during the lifetime of the mine.

So, our populations will just have neurotoxins in our bodies. What will this mean for the health of our population today, and what will that mean for our future offspring? Or how about our mental health?

While we may from the outside look as if we are economically depressed and that somehow justifies extraction from Canadian mining companies against the desire of our tribes, Donlin Gold is not going to relieve any depression at all. Not economic, not mental depression. And on that note, it will actually exacerbate mental health issues in the area. The health impact assessment quotes this as a negative impact: increase in morbidity and mortality related to psychosocial distress, such as depression, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, and changes to family structure with a likelihood of a whopping 66 to 90 percent.

These likelihoods and probabilities just for the development of a simple mining project, well, not to simple, it is the largest pure gold mine in the world, is pretty intense when it comes to what our tribes value, what our traditional values are.

With all of this in mind, that all the tribes, well, not all, but the majority of the tribes in the region and two of the larger entities that represent all of 56 tribes have been asking and will continue to ask that another look needs to be taken and that we have a supplemental environmental impact statement that fully encompasses our concerns and the reality of what the impacts would be if a tailing stem failure did happen.

So I would just really encourage Senator Lisa Murkowski and the Committee on Indian Affairs that you please govern us for the health and well-being of our people, one that is worth so much more than relationships to corporations that relationship-building and the sponsorships they provide anyone. Our relationship, the fact that we are salmon people is worth so much more than any for-profit corporate interest and any of what you are doing, the important jobs that you hold.

We are your constituents. Our healthy future needs your help to make sure that these things are addressed and resolve.  
Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF [SPEAKER NAME NOT ON RECORDING]**

Speaker. I was going to say, to add to that, but due to time constrictions that I had, I provided testimony on record, I have the records and the transcripts of the State of Alaska when they interviewed me in 2010.

In that document, it stated that I grew up in the fish camp, I was one of the last that grew up in the fish camp. I never came to Bethel, only for the Fourth of July, and then in August to come to start school. So I am one of the last of the generations, those days in the mid-1960s.

I wanted to offer that when Senator Lisa Murkowski said short of legislation, what needs to happen, because legislation will take a long time, I know that, but I think even something as simple as crossing the lines, crossing parties and getting a compromise on this one issue, because the red and blue are always at it, you know that.

What needs to happen is we need to come together, even in the committee, the Senate committee, to recognize that this is the systematic starvation of a people, people in peril. That is exactly what is happening here. I don't know what it will take, a presential order or whatever, that doesn't take any legislation. An order from the President that at least recognizes that we have a problem here with the Natives in Alaska.

Even the recognition, Federal recognition, is a good start. That is how I would like to complete my testimony.

Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF JEFF SANDERS**

Mr. SANDERS. I am Jeff Sanders. I live in Bethel and have lived here continuously since 1971.

I am 76 years old, and I want to speak to salmon and in the YK Delta.

I would like to speak first of all to trawler impacts on our fisheries. I believe that the trawling participants in what has been labeled as a mid-water trawl fishery for pollock have done an excellent job with limiting their bycatch, particularly of king salmon, which there seems to be the most pressure for them to do. Their yearly catch seems to be down from a high of 122,000 when the ended up in our rifle sights, I guess you could say, to a manageable 10,000 to 15,000 yearly. That is a [indiscernible].

So to ask them or accuse them of too much bycatch on king salmon, for instance, I think is a wrong path to take. I think if there is going to be problems that we find with this fishery, they are going to be smoking gun types of problems. What I mean by that, I would illustrate with the example of when the Japanese High Seas Gillnet Fishery was eliminated, the first time we really found out there was more of a problem than what we thought there was was when a man named Major did a study, and demonstrated that there was a significant amount of dropout. So we were undercounting their catch of king salmon. This is when they were tar-

getting salmon in what was called at the time the doughnut hole, which was an area that was created by Magnuson-Stevens regulation.

Another example of a smoking gun would be, and putting those examples into the trawl fishery, which I am talking about, a number of scientists as of late have talked about the fact that this fishery that is supposed to be a mid-water trawl fishery is actually in the shallow Bering Sea, oftentimes hard on bottom fishery, which creates bycatch and habitat problems that we don't normally attribute to the fishery. I think we need to fund more research to find out if that is true, and if it is true, the percentage of time they actually hard on the bottom.

Most recently, with the report that they had captured eight orcas and I believe killed seven of them, and the fact that they were in front of the trawl where they couldn't be captured and not following the trawl to pick up injured or easy-to-harvest salmon would lead me to believe there are some other problems there, to where we are undercounting the impact of that fishery. I think more research needs to be dedicated to that.

Understanding, I like to make some comparisons to the Japanese High Seas Fishery. That was not eliminated because they were catching, technically, it wasn't eliminated because they were catching our king salmon, technically, it was eliminated because of the damage it was doing to birds and other animals. The dagger that actually put an end to it was when Harold Sparck and Don Mitchell went to Washington, D.C. court and rescinded their marine mammal taking permit. I think that is something that could happen to this fishery. I am not advocating that it should. I would actually like to see this fishery succeed because of the massive amount of ocean protein that they furnish for the rest of the world. But I don't want it to succeed on the backs of weaker stocks that are in their path.

The other issue I would like to focus on is the Area M intercept of all kinds of weak stocks. Certainly, the stocks that we have on the Kuskokwim and the Yukon are weak when compared to the massive red runs that they are supposed to be targeting, the Bristol Bay red runs. They seem to be operating this fishery basically in conflict with international resolve that these fish, salmon are to be harvested. The optimal way to harvest salmon is in their terminal areas. There are a number of reasons that area cited by the international community. The one thing I like is that it prevents us from overharvesting weak stocks.

The State manages this fishery. I would suggest they should have oversight from the Federal managers through a salmon management plan with the Council to provide oversight for this fishery, so that they don't overharvest the weak stocks that come through, which are the western Alaskan chums and both [indiscernible] chums that go into the Yukon and the single runs that go everywhere else. I think there should be a lot of scrutiny put on their salmon management plan, and their salmon management plan should take care of this.

This fishery should be consistent with international norms and not the normal standby that we are Alaskans, we do things differently, and we really hate Federal oversight, because that is not

the issue here. Federal oversight is needed to make this fishery compliant with international norms.

It is also needed to protect the Yukon fall chum which goes into Canada. Its harvest is restricted everywhere outside of Canada to produce numbers that are actually a government-to-government, Federal-State department, the State department transboundary agreement to deliver certain amounts of fish to the border.

People in the river are doing that. Managers are doing that. The only people who aren't doing that are the ocean fishers.

And we need to establish funding to develop a much better genetic outline, because that seems to be, we don't do calving studies anymore, or still pattern analysis. We need to step up our genetics, so if this fishery can persist in the area called Area M, we need to find out when other fish, when weak stocks are in the area where the fishing is being conducted, and do our utmost to avoid them. We may find out that we can avoid them, which would basically abolish the fishery.

Thank you. I realize I have used more time than most people get.

#### **STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY ANDREW**

Mr. Timothy Andrew. My name is Timothy Andrew. I am from Bethel [indiscernible], I provided testimony within the attributed time limit, but it wasn't enough time. I wanted to make sure that the committee heard that.

We are the people of the drum; we are the people of the land. Salmon is a very, very important element to our culture, cultural well-being, cultural health, cultural sharing, cultural love for one another, and for other people.

We are true stewards of the land from. Without the drumbeat of our people, the salmon, the moose, the caribou, and other wild natural resources that surround us that we utilize for our food and for all the values that I have given earlier, without our drumbeat, our people are no more. Our resources will be no more as well.

So it is important that we continue to have every element of our food to provide for our committees, for our people, the people that we love, for our subsistence ceremonies. If we stop beating the drum, our people, our resources will be no more.

Thank you.

#### **STATEMENT OF EARL SAMUELS**

Mr. SAMUELS. I am Earl Samuels from Napaskiak. I want to add on just a short little brief talk about the fish camp. Three minutes was not enough.

Our local area of fish camp is, we call it school. You have probably heard it many times in testimony. The fish camp is a place where you bring your family and youth. It is kind of like a home school. That is where they learn how to make a fire for smoking, learn how to gather wood, the particular kind of wood you need to smoke a salmon. You don't smoke it with driftwood, you have to learn how to go out and get the right wood with your elder, the right cottonwood.

This was part of the knowledge we passed down to our young ones, from a young age. Fire-starting, fish camp is a good place to learn that. One year, I taught my young grandkids to learn to start

a fire old-time style, rubbing sticks together, a skill that once our elders had. We don't have it any more. We rely on big lighters and matches.

Fishing, we spend time teaching youth how to use the right net, the length of net. That was another thing brought out here, the net size was brought up. We teach our youth how to hang a net against damage, how to fix it, and where to fish. You just can't go out in the river to go fish. There are certain areas that are good, certain areas that don't fish. That is what we pass on.

The ladies, we have girls at a young age that learn how to cut, first with the smaller whitefish and to the smaller salmon. We are losing that. We don't do this enough. The cutting skills we are starting to lose. How to cut the fish, there are certain ways you cut a whitefish, there is a certain way you cut a chum salmon. There is a certain way to cut a king salmon. All different types, three different ways of cutting fish, so it can dry better and to know when to put that fish in a smokehouse.

Here on the Kuskokwim, we are taught how to watch the fish dry, when it starts to form oil, then it is time to put it in the smoker. That is some of the things we try to teach our youth.

With the lack of fish, to go back just a little bit, we were taught to catch as many fish as you can. When I asked the elder why, the elder responded, in famine, you never know when fish will come in abundance. If you live through the famine, he said, you will understand. We are fortunate we never had famine in our region.

We didn't have stores years ago; we truly knew how to subsist. We have grocery stores, but even now, we can't rely on the grocery stores. A good example, Yukon, Kuskokwim, bad weather. We are without airplanes for days and weeks, affecting the food chain. We can't really rely on that store.

When people want to go to the store, out in this area in the summer, even in the winter, they go to the river. Even in the winter time, the whitefish are very important to the diet.

I wanted to add on, and you truly have to understand a subsistence way of life. I heard it out on the floor just briefly. If you live it and understand it, then you truly know the way of food security and subsistence. If you don't understand it, a lot of people don't, I think I see even the board members don't understand. The Fish Board, the North Pacific Board.

Earlier I said it would be nice to add extra seats to the North Pacific, even to the Fish and Game Board, add an extra seat for members of Kuskokwim, add an extra seat for members of the lower Yukon, add an extra seat for people in western Alaska. That is three extra seats. I know they could add that on. We might have to try. They are appointed, I believe. That would be an addition to benefit the region.

Just a slight addition. I wanted to add on, years ago, the Kuskokwim was an abundance, abundance of fish, king salmon, silver salmon. But now we can see a change, just the red salmon coming into the rivers now. Kings are lacking, chums are lacking, but the red salmon once never was in this river. In the last few years now, they are the dominant salmon. That is what we are targeting now.

The king salmon come in first, early spring, the salmon that we once fished for, hung up and dried. Now it is the salmon, elders say, it is a salmon that we just want to taste. All we want is a meal on the table. That is all we are asking.

If you go to the other areas, Area M, I noticed, is slightly different to me. They were fighting to put money on the table for use of the salmon, the fish they are catching. I could see that the trend was similar to the Yukon-Kuskokwim years ago when we had the abundance of king salmon. Area M people have to realize that they can do damage to what both Kuskokwim and Yukon can do. Pretty soon, there will be no more fishing in Area M, which will three times impact our region. I don't think they see the overall picture.

The same goes with the trawlers out there. Sure, it is the economic base, but it is affecting all of us across Alaska. Something has to change. Internationally, lack of enforcement out there, international laws are different, that was another thing that was brought up, was jurisdiction down there. Are their fishing in Federal waters or State waters? Always the jurisdiction.

I would like to see that Area M even, the consequences like we have, try it out. Reduce some of the fishing hours down there and see what happens to the rest of Alaska. I remember one year Area M did have a strike. They struck for a couple of weeks and we benefited. There was so much fish out here, and we figured out why later, it was because of the strike. We benefited out here.

Thank you.

Just to add on to the comment there, I heard the CEO of YKHC read his testimony. Omega-3 was brought up, a vitamin. Vitamin D was brought up. Where do we get our vitamin D now? It could be from the lack of salmon all these years, we go in for our medicals, the doctor says, your vitamin D is low. Vitamin D plays a huge role in the body. The Omega oils from the salmon play a big role in the body to stay healthy.

Where do we go to get these vitamins now here at the YK? Our hospital now. Unacceptable. There is no reason why we have to go to the hospital to pick up these extra vitamins.

I see the fish meeting is here at the hospital. The fishing regulations and salmon rules are broken. I thought it was kind of neat to have the salmon hearing here at the hospital. If our body is broken, we go to the hospital, here, right here in this building, talk to the doctors, they give you the tools to try to get better.

I thought it was appropriate to get the hearing here, because the salmon rules and regulations are broken out here in western Alaska. Hopefully with today's testimony, things could change. We just need to be heard. If we can get people on the fish boards or fish commissions to listen, listen and take action, that would benefit the region, we wouldn't be here today. Thank you.

That was just a time out. You heard mid-size earlier. During the testimony, [indiscernible] Kuskokwim area and the Yukon area once fished with 300-foot size nets. Some 45 meshes deep on the Yukon, some more were in the past. Now they are regulated to fish on the Kuskokwim here, net restrictions came into place.

Maybe this is a tool to save the king, the salmon. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe the State Fish and Game people fished in the fishery and [indiscernible] maybe they have to do their own study. But

locally, this size net [indiscernible] locally they are saying we are doing more damage to the king salmon, they are bumping the nets, they are rolling off, and they are dying.

Maybe the Fish and Game should do a study of that. Where we once fished with the eight-inch net, now we are restricted to the 100-foot long, or the 150-foot nets, six inches or less in mesh size. That is a [indiscernible] size. Sometimes in the beginning of the season, 75-foot or 100-foot net, six inches or less, or four inches.

We don't mind, as long as we catch any kind of fish to put a meal on the table. But like I said, we are overregulated people. Just what we need.

Last summer, we had one, two, three, four openings. The first opening, it was like combat fishing out there. Commercial fishing is what it looked like. One area had 23 boats. How are you supposed to manage a river with that many people in the river? That has to change, how you manage the river, who can go out and fish. You can divide up the days, I guess, I don't know, they could have figured it out.

The good spots on the river, there are not too many of them. The set net time, they say, oh, the set net, 100-foot net, go on the river and try to set a net. People making the rules set netting [indiscernible]. If you take a square area of the river, you will be lucky if you find two set net spots.

Same way on the Yukon River, those are issues, problems. So, we have to put our heads together. Everybody has to work together, listen to each other before there are no more salmon to regulate. Thank you.

#### **STATEMENT OF ROBERT ENOCH**

Mr. ENOCH. This is Robert Enoch. I am from Tuntutuliak, Alaskan, near the mouth of the Kuskokwim.

I just want to share a couple of things concerning the salmon. First, salmon, they came across an information that was [indiscernible], salmon, I believe in 1972 or 1982. I can't remember exactly which year it was done down in Area M or False Pass. There was a tagging study, and from that tagging study, 20 something, in excess of 25 percent of the fish that were caught here on the Kuskokwim that were tagged down there, that is the number I came across only from the Kuskokwim River, something like more than 25 percent of the fish that were tagged down in False Pass were caught in the Kuskokwim.

That is, when you put spawning rivers, like Bristol Bay, Kuskokwim, Yukon, Norton Sound, that is a pretty significant number that shows how much salmon are intercepted down there that swim through there.

The other thing, one thing I wanted to share also is that fish camp, back before the Fish and Game, the State Fish and Game started regulating our salmon fishery, our life, some of the people who come into the, we are the stewards of the land, our resources. We said, looking at our parents before their time up to their time, before the State, before our life became regulated, there was plenty of salmon.

I am from near the mouth of the Kuskokwim. Back before the State Fish and Game, there was always a return, my people caught



their fish and stopped fishing when they had their quota. They had their own quota. So that way upriver, they still got their fish. That is the kind of stewards our people were. They still are. They still could be. Because up until restrictions were placed on us, we were still practicing the same way, caught what we needed and then stopped fishing. That allowed the salmon to escape to their spawning grounds.

Just wanted to share that in case it is thought about in the committee, in the policy making processes. Thank you.

#### STATEMENT OF NIKKI POLLOCK

Ms. POLLOCK. Quyanana for the opportunity to provide comments today. In particular, quyanana to our veterans. Alaska has the highest root share of veteran residents, at 10.1 percent, according to the 2022 United States Census Bureau.

Alaska Natives and American Indians also serve in the U.S. Armed Forces at higher rates than any other U.S. group. [Speaking in Native tongue] Senator Murkowski and the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, thank you for your time, attention, and presence. Your presence is your present, each and every one of you.

My name is [phrase in Native tongue] Nikki Pollock. I am an Orutsararmiut, ONC tribal citizen, Yup'ik and Athabascan. I also work for the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. Furthermore, I am a mother, trained and experienced registered nurse, and lifelong Kuskokwim fisherwoman and subsistence gatherer.

We have all spent, those who are here today, have spent most of our life growing up at fish camp and on the river, surrounded by family, friends, and traditional values and language. The Yup'ik culture represents Alaska's largest ethnic population in southwest Alaska. The Yup'ik, Cup'ik and Athabascan cultures and values are part of our daily lives. We speak our original language and practice a substitute lifestyle to this day.

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, ANTHC, reported in 2020 approximately one in five or 20.3 percent Alaskans were Alaska Native or American Indian. At that time, an estimated 148,085 Alaska Native people lived in Alaska.

The U.S. Census Bureau from 2017 to 2021 population estimates a total of about 23,429 Alaska Natives and American Indians in our Calista region. Between 2010 and 2020, the Alaska Native population increased overall by 5 percent. Notably a third of our Alaska Native population within the State is under the age of 20. Additionally, the largest growth of Alaska Native population has been within the 65 to 79 age group.

According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2016, there were 10.2 million Alaska Natives and American Indians in combination or alone, which constitutes about 2.4 percent of the United States total population. Yet despite being less than 3 percent of the overall United States population, our indigenous people are plagued with multiple diet-related illnesses, and surpass our non-Native constituents in disproportionately outrageous numbers, in many chronic conditions and poor health outcomes.

The estimated median household income for Alaska Native people is about \$49,959, significantly lower than Alaskan Whites. The unemployment rate in 2020 for the Bethel Census Area was about

11.56, and the Kusilvak Census Area was about 19.98 in that area, up 2 percent from 2019.

Considerably, there are fewer jobs in the villages. Additionally, our youth have less high school completion or higher educational attainment as compared to our non-Native constituents and other Alaska Native people statewide.

Furthermore, I wanted to add that out of the 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States, our region, in Alaska there is about 40 percent of the entire United States tribes here in Alaska. Then out of the entire United States tribes, about 10 percent of them are in this region.

Furthermore, the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission represents tribal voices as co-managers for fisheries resource here on the Kuskokwim, which represents about 5 percent of the United States tribes.

A background of our geological and logistic area, the YK Delta is a region of Alaska approximately 58,000 square miles, comparable to the size of the State of New York. Alaska's vast size and remote locations make it difficult to transport and store food in many rural communities. We rely on air taxis, snow machine and barge to import our goods.

Many areas do not have roads that connect us together with urban Alaska. We lack reliable transportation infrastructure, leading to logistical complications. Severe weather during the winter months, coupled with the high cost of shipping in these areas accounts for the high cost of living and doing business.

Heating fuel and unleaded fuel is about \$7.00 a gallon, avgas for aviation gas is about \$10.18 a gallon. A round-trip to Anchorage is about \$500.

Some background considerations and historical influences. Over the past 100 years, the local economy has evolved from one of total subsistence to a combination of cash economy. Hunting, trapping, and fishing remains a vital part of our diet and supplements our finances. Furthermore, the arts and crafts that are made with these natural materials add to our local economies.

Western society and the indigenous people who first made contact in 1741. Documentation between 1841 and 1863 from Russian missionaries reported the fur and fishing trades activities of our region's people. For over the next 100 years, there were numerous voyages to Russian America before it was sold to the United States in 1867, when Alaska joined as a territory.

The first economic development in the region began in the 1900s with the onset of mining operations from 1907 to 1909, when gold was discovered in the Kuskokwim. In 1959, Alaska became a State. In 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was signed. ANCSA created our 12 regional corporations and over 230 village corporations. The establishment changed the model of co-ownership of land to a corporate model that managed the lands and monies on behalf of our shareholders and established the Federal trust responsibility.

Prior to western contact and colonization, Alaska Natives lived exclusively off the land, water and air. In Yup'ik, we call the Creator [phrase in Native tongue], that is the Creator. We still practice that today. When we get anything from the land, we always give

thanks to [phrase in native tongue] because our Creator is the one who has provided with these resources.

Anyhow, ANTHSC reports that the traditional Alaska Native culture has a lot in common with the people who are thought to be the healthiest people in the world, eating off the land, living in close-knit communities, and sharing values, a sense of connection and purpose. The subsistence lifestyle needs a lot of physical activity too, amongst other things. Furthermore, the routine natural movement is one of the most impactful ways to increase lifespan, and a common habit among the world's longest-lived population.

Most of our communities originated from traditional hunting areas or fish camps. Historically, Alaska Natives have followed the seasons and food sources. We are salmon people who demonstrate great reverence for our food and way of life. Indigenous people have resiliently carried forward these traditions and still practice these nomadic seasonal camps.

Today, we have contemporary fish, moose, and berry camps, which help meet our most basic needs to provide supplementation of these nutrient-dense traditional foods. However, our way of life is experiencing a cultural loss. It is happening before our very eyes.

The decline in salmon is directly related to the increase in poverty, hunger, decrease in quality of life and life expectancy, increases in disease and chronic illness, and therefore, a greater need for overall costly services.

The Federal Government has a trust responsibility to ensure that tribal citizens have access to their trust-protected resources. Per the Executive Order EO12898, the Environmental Justice Law requires Federal agencies to identify and address adverse effects relating to the health or environment of their actions on minorities and low-income people.

The obstruction of tribal sovereignty and food sovereignty. Alaska Natives have faced precipitous changes imposed in a relatively short amount of time. It has been 156 years since we have joined the Union, and 64 years since we have joined statehood. Notably, in 2022, since the inception of the State of Alaska, tribes have finally been legislatively recognized in the Alaska State government, 63 years after joining statehood.

This speaks to the governmental and institutional marginalization of our First Nations people. Alaska Natives and their tribes have been disenfranchised through governmental process, particularly with the State of Alaska, who failed to even acknowledge sovereign First Nation people who have been here since time immemorial. There needs to be equitable distribution of the burden of conservation. We can no longer tolerate profit over our people.

We continue to endure here time, location, and frequency limitations. Yet little to no meaningful action is taken to reduce bycatch on the Bering Sea or Area M. Alaska Natives can no longer sustain to feed the world. We can hardly feed ourselves here on the river.

Food is literally being taken off of our plates to feed others. The lack of food sovereignty forces us to choose less nutritional food items, which have greater cost and overall less value.

Denying access to traditional foods. There are drastic changes that have occurred within our lifetime, with our relationship to

salmon. Subsistence has become a distant memory for some, due to less access, more restrictions, and health complications and financial challenges. These drastic lifestyle changes have caused various inequities for Native Americans.

Many restrictions have been imposed on indigenous people of the Kuskokwim River. Tribal governance, sovereignty, and food sovereignty are not being honored the way that they should be upheld by the Federal trust responsibility. Alaska Natives on the Kuskokwim River have been criminalized, fined, and placed on probation for illegally fishing during closures simply to feed their families.

Additionally, expensive gear has been seized by law enforcement, taking away some of the only modalities that these people have to use to feed their families. Additionally, the United Nations recognizes access to traditional foods as a basic human right, important for our survival. Access to salmon is also a matter of religious freedom.

The benefits of salmon, the nutritional benefits. The salmon are a traditional primary protein source, low in fat, high in protein, packed with Omega-3 fatty acids and other essential vitamins and minerals. Wild fish are the best nutritional food choice not only which prevent the onset of diet-related illness, it is one of the best medicines and treatments for those costly and burdensome conditions.

There is a saying that goes, one ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, a well-known idea that it is better to prevent an issue from occurring rather than having to correct it after the onset of the occurrence.

It is more costly to correct rather than to prevent. Fish are the missing vital element in our diet, cultural, and in general, life.

Vitamin D. Fish are an important source of vitamin D, which is important for our bone, muscle, brain and immune health. Through research and data, we know that there is a specific correlation of maternal vitamin D deficiency with early childhood caries, directly related to the decrease in traditional marine diet since the 1960s.

Per the United States Army, we know that shorter hours of sunlight causes increased risks of health. The 2017 article states that Vitamin D is a hormone produced by the skin when exposed to sunlight. It also plays an important role in both physical and mental health.

With prolonged hours of darkness during the winter, Alaskans seldom get enough sunlight to produce a sufficient supply of vitamin D, per the National Library of Medicine. The National Center for Biotechnology Information states that Alaska Native children experience one of the highest reported rates of severe early childhood caries related to vitamin D concentrations in Alaska Native child-bearing women in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta region, which have been steadily decreasing since the 1960s due to current low levels that directly correlate to the decrease in traditional marine diet.

Not only are we missing out on nutritional vitamin D, but indigenous people are also missing out on the Vitamin D that goes along with exercise in the summer months while harvesting and processing our catch. Because of this decrease in access, there is an in-

crease in sedentary lifestyle, which worsens the obesity effects Alaska Natives are facing at greater rates, coupled with other health issues. Not meeting our basic needs adversely affects our quality of life and quantity of life, causing overwhelming physical, emotional and spiritual distress.

Vitamin D is also known to regulate mental health. On our longest day of the year, our summer solstice, June 21, we get about 24 hours of sunlight. Despite this amount of sunlight, in severe contrast, with the shortest day of the year on December 21, the winter solstice, when we get about 7 hours of sunlight. When we go to school, it is in the dark. When we go home, it is dark.

The younger Alaska Native generations have been documented with lower serum concentrations of vitamin D as compared to older Alaska Natives. This indicates that there is a generational movement away from traditional lifestyles and diet. This indicates that traditional foods were historically responsible for maintaining adequate levels of vitamin D among indigenous populations in Alaska, rather than sunlight.

Omega-3 fatty acids. O3FAs help to reduce blood pressure and triglycerides, which helps reduce heart disease by preventing plaque-filled arteries. Furthermore, these fatty acids help to decrease the likelihood of heart attacks and strokes. Additionally, O3FAs are good for brain and eye development, as well as function. We know that O3FAs are important for healthy pregnancy and infant brain development in utero and in early childhood development. Furthermore, O3FAs are good for brain health and demonstrated to assist in mental cognition and disease prevention throughout our lifespan.

O3FAs are also known to elevate mood and can help improve mental health. Also, they have anti-inflammatory properties.

Food security and poverty. It is no surprise that there is a direct correlation with health consequences and increasing food, housing, and economic insecurity. Through various [indiscernible] studies of these insecurity factors, they have been directly linked to a range of adverse health outcomes, including mortality.

The Kuskokwim River amounts necessary for subsistence. Kuskokwim indigenous people have sacrificed their primary food source. As a result, Chinook escapement has been achieved for the past decade, including in 2023. Since the decline of salmon in the Kuskokwim indigenous peoples, ANS have not been met since 2020 for over a decade. Despite our valiant efforts, there is a hemorrhage of modifiable factors of the excessive bycatch in the Bering Sea and Area M.

This year alone, in the lower Kuskokwim, with heavier restrictions and enforcement, our people harvested a total of 11,929 chum salmon, a traditional food source that many Alaska Natives use for half-dried fish. Yet in the same year, 2023, the Bering Sea catch totaled 109,400 chum, and if that wasn't shocking enough, Area M's June 2023 harvest totaled 198,700 chums. Notably, these stocks included Asian and coastal [indiscernible] stocks and not all of them were bound for our river; nonetheless, every fish counts, especially since we have to bear the burden of conservation.

We need to address the underlying issues that directly affect our Kuskokwim River and wild salmon stocks. There is a multiple spe-

cies collapse threatening the health of our ecosystem and well-being. We do not have adequate access to the most basic traditional food source, due to overharvesting by bycatch that they are seeing in Area M.

In 2021, when we had our worst run in history, they had their best. Can you believe that? It is so backwards to me. I get so fired up. And we do not have access to our most basic food source. Yet the commercial industry is self-policed and has less restrictions and enforcement. Yet in 2023, there were nine citations for commercial vessels not retaining all their catch, also known as chum chucking, which greatly affects the genetic testing composition needed to identify these salmon stocks and their origin, which the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and NOAA constantly want more data.

We need to know the genetics: how did it go from 56 percent down to like 18? When we know that they are chum chucking, we just don't have proof of it, but this year we do because law enforcement was increased in the State jurisdiction. Do you know what they finally did? This was the first year that they ever used helicopters to go out and see these vessels chucking chums with long-range photography capabilities. That is how they caught them, because they didn't see law enforcement coming in, so they could stop doing what they were doing, change their behavior before they got caught. They got caught because that is what they do. We knew it was happening. It has been a problem, but we just didn't have any evidence. Now we do. It is a really important consideration to me.

Poverty and loss of our salmon. Not only are we experiencing shrinkflation in our grocery stores, with increasing prices, but we are also seeing shrinking fish sizes and higher cost of subsistence, which impacts our food security. We are struggling to feed our families.

Growing up, many Alaska Natives, like my mother, had to supplement their diet with salmon prior to eating a meal like supper. This was to help feed their bellies with food items that provided enduring energy. This was normal practice, and still goes on today. However, it has been impacted by the decline of salmon, adding to the overall local hunger crisis and diet-related illness.

To complicate matters even worse, our indigenous people have some of the highest rates of poverty and hunger in the Nation. According to ANTHC 2021 Health Status Report, about 34.9 percent of Yukon-Kuskokwim Alaska Natives experience poverty. Over one in four people in our region are experiencing poverty. That is greater than a third, as compared to 24 percent of other Alaska Natives statewide and the 7.2 percent of non-Natives statewide.

The American Heart Association states that one-fourth of all Alaska Natives and American Indians live in poverty per Federal guidelines. Thus, lower socioeconomic status is an important indicator in the determination of cardiovascular health. Furthermore, our Native people in the YK Delta are experiencing access issues with basic water and sanitation.

The report also demonstrates that about 21 percent, almost one in four households are without water and sewer services. Access to in-home water and wastewater services has a positive impact on public health, and can help stop the spread of disease and illness.

Because of the lack of food and food insecurity, there is a greater need for government commodities and services. The high cost of living makes accessing perishable, healthy foods challenging. One gallon of milk is about \$13. Five dozen of eggs here in Bethel, \$45. Subsistence food items have historically sustained our people. However, due to the decline in salmon, we are unable to meet our most basic food needs.

When we do get the opportunity to harvest salmon, we have observed that the salmon are returning smaller, adding to less overall food available. We hardly see any large fish anymore. The significant decline in salmon has been documented and observed over the last 60 years. What was once a reliable food source is now insufficient to sustain our most basic needs. This adds to the overall food shortage.

Kuskokwim people have limited access to food that represents a significantly large portion of our diet, food that is central to our lives and provides the bulk of our energy. There is an overall absence of food, exacerbated by the decline in salmon. There is greater reliance on store-bought, shelf-stable food, and other non-perishable items, public assistance and other government commodities. Additionally, there is greater reliance on government funded programs which address food insecurity, such as school lunches and elder meals.

The State of Alaska Division of Public Assistance, who administers the SNAP program, is about 6,000 cases behind, backlogged. SNAP beneficiaries are waiting on process, intensifying the food hunger. Government commodities have historically replaced traditional diets. This can be seen in our Native diet and culture. For example, prior to contact, we didn't have vegetable oil, sugar, or flour to make fried bread. Now it has morphed into a staple of our diet.

Another example of government commodities replacing our diet and changing our preference tastes, agoda, Eskimo ice cream. Historically, agoda was made with rendered animal fat. Now, most Natives use Crisco, a type of lard made of vegetable oil. Shipments of fish have been imported to villages to replace missing salmon stocks at times arriving inedible.

The lack of adequate social resources in remote Alaska. The State of Alaska 2020 to 2024 Strengthening the System, Alaska's Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program, identifies that the State has the following gaps in their services, which continue to exist in the comprehensive behavioral system. Some of the most significant areas of lack are residential psychiatric facilities, community-based crisis services, residential and outpatient behavioral services with case management, medication assisted treatment for substance abuse and associated recovery and support, adequate workforce and detoxification services, as well as affordable living with housing.

These services in remote Alaska need significant improvement.

The adverse health effects of the decrease in salmon. The salmon crisis on the Kuskokwim River has demonstrated extreme adverse impacts on the tribal health of western Alaska. Alaska Natives in the region have alarmingly higher rates of diet-related illness such as cancer, heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, mental health

issues, and diabetes, as compared to our non-indigenous counterparts. Consequently, we are experiencing the negative impacts of our physical and mental health directly related to our food quality, quantity, culture, and political and economic conditions. These impacts are directly and indirectly related to the decline in salmon and changes in the composition of specific nutrients in our diet.

According to the CDC, diabetes, Alaska Natives and American Indians have a greater chance of diabetes than any other racial group. Diabetes is the leading cause of kidney failure and other costly conditions that require numerous medications, dialysis, or even kidney transplant for survival. Additionally, there are other serious complications, such as blindness and amputation. Additionally, significant risk for cerebrovascular disease, which includes stroke. Kidney failure from diabetes is amongst the highest of any race for Alaska Natives and American Indians.

Cancer. Cancer was the first leading cause of death in Alaska Native people, both sexes combined, as well as Alaska Native females, from the 2014 to 2018 period, according to ANTHC. The Alaska cancer mortality rate for Alaska Native people is higher for both sexes combined, which is significantly higher than all U.S. races.

Native people have the highest rate of colorectal, kidney, lung, and stomach cancers as compared to our non-Native counterparts. Between 1999 and 2015, evidence shows that incidental rates of liver, kidney and breast cancer have significantly increased.

Cardiovascular. Heart disease is the second leading cause of death among Alaska Native people for both sexes combined. The Alaska Native mortality report between 1980 through 2018, ages 75 plus, heart disease was the leading cause of death for Alaska Native people, both sexes combined.

Cerebrovascular disease. Data reveals that Alaska Natives and American Indians have a greater risk to be diagnosed with cardiovascular disease. Furthermore, they have the highest rates of stroke compared to the rest of our United States constituents of any other racial group or ethnic group.

Our region has the highest rate here in the YK Delta, our region has the highest rate of mortality due to cerebrovascular disease, out of all regions of Alaska Natives throughout the State.

Psychiatry.org states that Alaska Natives and American Indians have disproportionately higher rates of mental health problems, as compared to the rest of the United States. The mental health issue, coupled with substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide and depression. SAHMSA.gov indicates that 10.2 percent of Alaska Natives and American Indians over the age of 18 have a substance use disorder.

Suicide rose 20 percent from 2015 to 2020 in the United States for Alaska Natives and American Indians as compared to our non-Native counterparts.

Depression is related to dietary deficits, coupled with mental health issues related to the loss of cultural identity and esteem. Additionally, social isolation from the decreased subsistence activities and congregation during meals should also be factored in, particularly intensified by the COVID pandemic.



The loss of identity and culture is affecting our people. The loss of cultural practices has resulted in less opportunities to interact and engage with family during harvesting and processing, which impacts our cohesion. The younger generation are not getting sufficient and frequent time, developing subsistence skills. The loss of belonging and cultural identity results in distress, furthermore impacting self-esteem and perception.

The loss of heritage and tradition has resulted in the loss of knowledge, language and practices. There have been monumental missed opportunities for demonstration of important survival skills. Cultural traditions related to salmon harvesting are an important way of our life and survival skills. It helps us connect to our past and present history by utilizing these skills, which promote cultural values and beliefs.

This provides us with a sense of identity, community, and belonging. We learn valuable life skills, such as patience with our process, taking care of our catch from beginning to end, not wasting. We learn the natural indicators and observe them. We watch the patterns in animals and weather.

Furthermore, we learn to appreciate and not play with our food or waste. Literally almost everything from a fish gets eaten or used, from the head to the tail, and literally almost everything in between.

Historically, Native people have made clothing out of fish items to survive these harsh elements. Modern utilization of fish skin includes Native arts and crafts, such as earrings and baskets, the vertebrae are also used.

Weight issues. American Indian and Alaska Native adults are 50 percent more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic whites. People who are overweight are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, high levels of blood fat, diabetes, all risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

Health challenges associated with chronic health conditions. Chronic diseases are defined broadly as a condition that lasts one or more years and requires ongoing medical attention or limited activities of daily living or both. Many chronic diseases are caused by a short list of risk behaviors, including tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke, poor nutrition, including diets low in fruit and vegetables and high in sodium and saturated fats, physical inactivity and excessive alcohol use.

Mortality rates. Alaska Native people all-cause mortality rates, both sexes combined, during 2014 to 2018 was 51 percent higher than the United States all races. Let me repeat that. The Alaska Native people all-cause mortality rates for both sexes combined from 2014 to 2018 was double the United States all race rate. Alaska Native people, both sexes combined, had significantly higher rates than the United States race, all United States races, for the top 10 leading causes of death, which includes, cancer, heart disease, unintentional injury, suicide, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, chronic liver disease, cerebrovascular disease, alcohol abuse, homicide and influenza.

The decreased access to our traditional rich protein source has significantly impacted the people of the Kuskokwim in various

ways, which is demonstrated by the 10-year lower life expectancy of 69.2.

Higher infant mortality rate and disproportionately inadequate quality of life. In 2021, an Alaska Native health status report revealed significant adverse health impacts to our physical and mental health, as well as well-being, which can be directly and indirectly tied to our decrease in our salmon diet. The report identifies Alaska Native statewide age-adjusted mortality rate per 100,000 for leading cause of death include cancer, heart disease, and unintentional injury. For these three causes of death accounted for almost half, 47.2 percent, of all deaths during this time.

Furthermore, between 2016 to 2019, the Alaska Native mortality rates were significantly higher in Alaska than our non-Native counterparts, for all, all 10 leading causes of death. It is crazy. I can't believe it.

Compared with non-Natives, I am going to just skip over this because I would like for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs to reference the Alaska Native Mortality Report that I referenced that shows these graphs. But I am going to skip over that, because that is a little bit lengthy.

But between 2014 to 2018, ANTHC epidemiology research demonstrates that Alaska Native people and the Yukon Kuskokwim service region led the unintentional mortality rate throughout the Alaska regions. Notably, it is the third leading cause of death for all Alaska Natives.

Yet there has been an improvement, by 39 percent, of the decrease in mortality rate for unintentional injury in the YK region since the last assessment had been done. But we still lead the State, we still lead out of all regions for Alaska Natives. Unbelievably, during the same time period, our region had a suicide increase of 143 percent. Let me repeat that: 143 percent increase in suicide between 1980 and 1983, and 2014 and 2018. The YK Delta has the third highest rate of suicide in all regions for Alaska Natives. Our region has the second highest rate of alcohol abuse related mortality, as well as the second highest rate for mortality for homicide out of all regions for the State for Alaska Natives.

The YK Delta Alaska Natives are documented to experience higher rates of cerebrovascular mortality throughout the entire State at 73 percent as compared to the statewide average of 51.9, affecting our region's males more than our females.

We also have the highest rate of influenza and pneumonia mortality rates. YK region has almost double, at 55.3 percent, compared to the State average of 27.2 for both males and females. We also have higher rates than average for congenital malformation and peri-natal mortality rates.

Cultural and spiritual impacts. Cultural identity, belonging, language, values and tradition. English is often taught as a second language in our communities, because our Yup'ik language and tradition and culture are so important to us. Bethel, Alaska has a kindergarten through sixth grade Yup'ik immersion school named Ayaprun Elitnaurvik, with an indigenous developed curriculum. In our culture, our elders are highly respected and valued and cared for. Elders mentor younger generations on important life skills and traditional knowledge. Data shows that Native elders aren't living

as long as they should, and have a significantly shorter life expectancy by about 10 years. When our elders aren't living as long as they should, or as healthy as they should, we lose valuable opportunities for intergenerational connectivity and information sharing.

At traditional fish camps is a place where extended family and friends gather every summer. Elders and adults and youth work side by side to process and store fish, berries and other food, while passing down cultural knowledge. Fishing and processing our catch are a longstanding, important aspect of our active daily living skills. These practices hold great cultural and religious ceremonial purposes. Fish are the literal, literal fabric and glue that hold our communities and DNA together. Protein, you need protein for DNA synthesis. You need it for your DNA to be able to function.

The fabric and glue, that is the fabric and glue that holds our communities and DNA together, literally.

Fishing and processing brings us together and teaches us to work together to achieve basic needs. These interactions are important for value and knowledge sharing, intergenerational connectivity and development of personal life skills.

These gatherings surrounding fish are of utmost importance for creating long-lasting, positive impacts that ensure cultural survival. The ongoing experience of cultural loss has rippling impacts on our culture and personal identity, our self-esteem, our morale and mental health issues.

Cultural survival. Fish are an important part of our cultural survival. It is an imperative time that we reclaim our culture and traditional values and food. It is time to act now before permanent cultural loss and destruction is irreversible.

One thing that I didn't get to expand on is, there is also less food for our dog teams and general ecosystem. People have mentioned that today with the fish.

That brings me to my next comment about, the salmon crisis now is in stark contrast to previous abundance in recent memories. Most young people from this region can recall when there was abundant fish. The river banks used to be sprinkled with spawned-out salmon, an almost forgotten memory for some. It has been years since we have seen spawned-out salmon carcasses on the river banks, perhaps indicating that there is more than just human food insecurity due to the decrease in salmon, not just limited to humans.

Even when there was abundance, Native values were shared, never to take more than what we needed, to respect our food, to care for others. The local people bring unique perspectives and provide expert, first-hand experiences of these historical events, and should always be an important consideration in the decision-making process and co-management.

Furthermore, religious and ceremonial contexts, as you have heard today by Tim Andrew, one of our local respected elders, in 2023, elders have been asking if they could go out and fish to feed their families during funerals. It is sad that we aren't able to practice our culture. There isn't enough fish to feed, even at these major life events that historically we have always had enough fish. That was what we put on the table to feed everybody. And not just

in the summer, but throughout the winter, we always had enough to get us through the next season.

And then so disparaging: salmon are an important part of our social celebrations when we congregate together, particularly at these life events of birth, marriage, and death. Forced assimilation imposed on us have limited our cultural practices and have caused our indigenous people not to practice their customary traditions.

Health care costs related to decreased dietary salmon. There are both direct and indirect costs associated with chronic conditions and poor health outcomes. Disease management is more costly than prevention, especially in western Alaska. Our geographical location and isolation increases the cost of services exponentially. The only way in and out of our region is by air or barge. This adds to the direct and indirect costs associated with the decline in salmon on the Kuskokwim River.

Thirty years ago, Alaska's per capita spending on health care was about the same as the national average. In the early 2000s, however, expenditures in Alaska began to grow and kept growing. Alaska's per capita expenditures on hospital care now are 50 percent higher than the national average, and 80 percent higher for clinical services.

This is related to our geographical location, labor costs, transportation costs by air and barge, lack of market competition, and increased Medicare costs. Alaska's Medicaid costs are about 56 percent greater than the national average. The expense to provide services to vulnerable and isolated underserved people like ourselves comes at a higher price.

The social burden. Per the November 1st, 2023 American Diabetes Association Report findings, the total annual cost of diabetes in the United States was at \$412.9 billion. Direct costs of diabetes was \$306.6 billion, and the indirect was \$106.3 billion. One out of every four dollars in health care is from a diabetes diagnosis. On average, people diagnosed with diabetes have 2.6 times more medical expenditures than if they didn't have that diagnosis.

Chronic disease, such as heart disease and cancer and diabetes are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. They are also the leading drivers for the Nation's \$1.4 trillion annual health care costs. There is a rising cost of service for Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, which impacts society at large.

Other related illnesses, co-morbidities, medications, frequent appointments, labs, other diagnostics, related transportation costs, hospitalization, end fees, home care, long-term care, surgical intervention, physical therapy, ancillary services, emergency room services, medics, the list goes on.

The economic impacts due to decreased salmon. In the YK Delta, reliance on the land is not just a way of life. It is a necessity. The monetary economic supplements are traditional subsistence economies. As a result, our people have a marked connection to the land that is deeply rooted in our culture and traditions. Salmon is a central part of our food security diet and traditional economy.

Historically, we bartered and shared, and this helped extend our finances and purchase less unhealthy grocery food items. But the reduced productivity due to illness and disability should also be considered. This includes the lost work days, restricted activities,

mortality, permanent disability due to illness, early retirement, and as I mentioned, death. A burden to individuals and families and communities, and ultimately society.

Reducing or eliminating adverse effects caused by salmon decline would significantly improve our overall quality of life and at the same time meet our most basic nutritional needs, as well as reducing medical costs, furthermore, increasing productivity and workforce development. It is ascertainable to quantify the financial impacts of the salmon decline here on the Kuskokwim river and throughout the entire State, using similar methods to other tribal communities, such as California Karuk Tribe, who have faced similar experiences as Alaska Natives regarding the negative impacts of our health and well-being due to salmon decline and the associated costs in financial terms.

However, it must be greatly stressed that the loss of culture is priceless and needs to be protected. It is the Federal Government's trust responsibility. Immediate action is needed now to prevent continued cultural and health disparities.

Thank you.



## A P P E N D I X

### PREPARED STATEMENT OF KEVIN WHITWORTH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KUSKOKWIM RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION (KRITFC)

Dear Chairman Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC), I express my gratitude to Senator Murkowski and this Committee for holding this historic field hearing in Bethel, Alaska, on November 10, 2023, to solicit insight and experiences of the state of our Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) region communities' health and well-being after years of salmon declines. We submit these written comments to complement those provided during the Witness Panel by our Chair, Jonathan Samuelson.

KRITFC is an inter-Tribal consortium representing the 33 federally recognized Tribes of the Kuskokwim River watershed, located in rural western Alaska, in fisheries management, research, and monitoring. Our 27 appointed Commissioners, 7 Executive Council members, 5 In-Season Managers, and Elder Advisors work to protect and sustain our Kuskokwim salmon fisheries and traditional ways of life using both Traditional Knowledge and the best available Western science. Since 2016, KRITFC has collaboratively managed Kuskokwim salmon fisheries with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pursuant to our Memorandum of Understanding authorized by the statutes of Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). This cooperative partnership has allowed local, Indigenous people to work with the federal government to make fisheries decisions for the well-being of our salmon and our communities—an especially critical partnership given the state of our salmon today (see attached KRITFC 2023 End-of-Season Summary; also, KRITFC 2022).\*

Forty percent of the nation's Tribes reside in Alaska; the AYK region encompasses 52 percent of Alaska Native Tribes; and nearly 15 percent of Alaska Native Tribes are represented by KRITFC. These Indigenous communities throughout the Kuskokwim drainage have experienced multispecies salmon declines for over a decade, first seen with the decline of Chinook salmon around 2009 followed by recent collapses in chum and coho salmon. These multi-species, multi-year salmon declines wreak havoc on the health and well-being of our communities and ecosystems, with our health, culture and traditions, economies, and environments—interconnected through salmon—thrown off balance.

Shifts in salmon abundance are nothing new to our families; over millennia we have adapted our Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Dene stewardship practices to respect, protect, and harvest salmon in times of abundance and scarcity. However, our Tribes' exclusion from contemporary salmon management as well as the pervasive effects of climate change are impacting present-day salmon declines in new ways. Unlike cyclical rises and falls of salmon populations, we now see recordbreaking low returns of salmon without subsequent surges in abundance. This is concerning for the well-being and sustainability of present and future generations of Kuskokwim fishing families.

Moreover, salmon declines are acutely contributing to nutritional, physical, and mental health crises afflicting our communities. Despite representing less than 3 percent of the overall U.S. population, our Indigenous populations disproportionately surpass non-Native citizens in many chronic conditions, diet-related diseases, and mental illnesses, including diabetes, heart/cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, and cancer. Many of these preventative conditions, exacerbated by high poverty rates and exorbitant food and living expenses in our region, cause early death. From 2014–2018, the mortality rate of Alaska Native people was 51 percent higher than that of all other races in the U.S., and our life expectancy at 69.2 years is 10 years less than the national average. Suicide has increased 143 percent in our region since the early 1980s, and the rates of suicide, substance abuse, and homicide

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\*The information referred to has been retained in the Committee files.

in the AYK region are among the highest in Alaska (*see ANTHC 2021*). These health disparities can be directly linked to the absence of salmon: our primary traditional food, which has sustained us nutritionally through its abundance of vitamins, minerals, and protein, as well as culturally as the center of our families, languages, and seasonal calendars of harvest and traditions. Salmon has provided for our Peoples' wellbeing, longevity, and way of life throughout generations, and we are suffering its absence today.

Senator Murkowski asked the Witness Panel members during the field hearing what we do to replace wild food sources, like salmon, when they are in such states of collapse. When our wild salmon are gone, many in our off-the-road-system communities supplement their diets with processed foods, often at further risk to their health. They may purchase these at double, if not triple or quadruple, the price of goods in the Lower 48 at the sole grocery store in their village. They may rely on SNAP benefits, WIC benefits, or food boxes to put food on their tables. Several Tribal governments and organizations have purchased tens of thousands of dollars of salmon filets from other parts of Alaska, like Bristol Bay, to distribute fish to their citizens. Some people turn to other traditional foods, like whitefish and moose, to try to fill gaps in their freezers left by salmon, but even these are fewer and farther between with climate change and the depletion of salmon from the ecosystem. There is nothing that can truly replace salmon at the center of our diets; often, people go without, and they go hungry.

Our situation is dire, and it indicates we need a fundamental shift in our fishery management systems to account for climate change, maintain ecosystem balances, and protect our traditional foods and ways of life. KRITFC asks this Committee to foster these changes by:

- Supporting co-stewardship efforts between Tribes and federal agencies, such as the Gravel-to-Gravel Keystone Initiative.
- Urging the Department of Commerce and National Marine Fisheries Service to Consult with and engage in co-stewardship with our Tribes, including those that are not coastal but depend on foods from the Bering Sea and North Pacific to sustain our health and well-being.
- Supporting the elevation of Traditional Knowledge in fisheries and wildlife management, including and especially by enacting legislative changes to increase Alaska Native Tribal representation on management bodies like the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and Federal Subsistence Board.

Again, we thank you, Senator Murkowski, for visiting our home—and the home of our salmon—to listen to our stories. Tsen'anh, Qu yana. We look forward to continuing to work with this Committee to find meaningful, just remedies to our salmon, health, and cultural crisis.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE ARCTIC-YUKON-KUSKOKWIM TRIBAL CONSORTIUM

Dear Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and Members of the Committee, Thank you for this important opportunity to share our perspective on the impacts of the sudden and devastating salmon collapses occurring in our region over the past few years. It is our hope that sharing our experiences, and proposed solutions, will provide you with a sense of how serious this crisis is, and also a clear understanding of our federal policy priorities for response and recovery. We submit these comments to enhance and follow-up on the witness testimonies of our organizations' leaders, including Chair Thaddeus Tikiun (Association of Village Council Presidents), Chief/Chair Brian Ridley (Tanana Chiefs Conference), Chair Jonathan Samuelson (Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission), and Chair/Chief Karma Ulvi (Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission).

Indigenous peoples of the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) regions have lived and been stewards of our land and waters since time immemorial. Salmon in particular have supported our Indigenous communities' physical, mental, cultural, spiritual, and economic health and well-being through millennia. We have seen times of high and low salmon returns, and in times of low abundance we have conserved salmon, listening to the wisdom of our Elders, to protect and safeguard future abundance while providing for the most vulnerable members of our Tribes and communities.

We are the first salmon stewards of Alaska, and our communities are now witnessing severe changes across the entire AYK and Bering Sea ecosystem. Climate change is affecting every link in the food chain, including critical subsistence species like salmon and marine mammals. At the same time, we are facing the impacts of a more powerful industrial fishing fleet that is removing millions of pounds of biomass from nearshore and offshore waters more swiftly than ever. The cumulative



impacts of climate change and this immense extraction of biomass from the Bering Sea ecosystem make it near impossible to imagine species like salmon ever being able to recover without significant changes to how we manage these ecosystems.

Tribal members feel extremely disempowered in the fishery management process—we don't have representation on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) that makes decisions, and we see time after time that our advocacy and testimony do not shape or influence how the Council acts. We see this disempowerment at the Alaska Board of Fisheries, too. It is horribly painful to hear federal fishery managers sternly declare, if not scold us, that our recommendations and pleas are simply not "practicable" because they would cause a burden or reduction in profits for the commercial fishing fleet and probably wouldn't make a difference. There is no broad base of knowledge working to develop strategies to provide for salmon returns and vibrant commercial fisheries. AYK salmon runs are being allowed to wither away while status quo management continues. We are told The United States of America can't address this catastrophe regardless of how strong a contributor commercial fisheries is to the current status of salmon runs, because such actions can only be done to the extent practicable—and it wouldn't be practicable to explore and initiate management actions that might limit commercial fisheries.

Our Tribes want to be at the table. We know that if the State of Alaska and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) took concrete and meaningful steps to support AYK salmon survival in the marine environment, we could reach a better regime that offers salmon returning to Western Alaska a chance to survive. But Tribes have no power or voice in the processes that determine these outcomes. And unlike other Federal actions, there is no appeal process. As we continue to advocate at public forums like the Alaska Board of Fisheries and the NPFMC, we urge you as members of the United States Senate to pursue the following policy recommendations for the benefit and continued survival of AYK salmon and the communities that rely on them.

We believe it is possible to strengthen the resilience of the ecosystem to restore and maintain a healthy, biodiverse system that provides for salmon returns to our rivers and streams. But it will take a broad range of knowledge, commitment, and sacrifice by all—not just us subsistence users along the rivers. We need more federal support in finding solutions that will share the burden of sacrifice across all stakeholders to ensure to long-term viability of salmon. That's what we've learned from our Elders—that in times of shortage we share in the sacrifice to provide for salmon survival and ensure continued abundance for all salmon-reliant Alaskans, especially future generations.

We hope our comments impress upon you the importance of Tribal voices, Local & Traditional Knowledge, and cooperative management in the fishery management process and the critical importance of immediate action that can make a difference in long term survival of salmon and our tribes. Subsistence communities are the only fishery stakeholders who are being forced to sacrifice during this unprecedented salmon crisis. We believe that we can work together with other fishery stakeholders and the federal government to share the burden of sacrifice.

#### **Increased Opportunities and Funding for Co-management**

Developing strong co-management relationships between Tribes and federal agencies is critical for addressing the ongoing salmon crisis and recovering salmon populations. Co-management has proven to be the best path for stabilizing and recovering declining species while also safeguarding the cultural nourishment of Tribal and subsistence communities. Tribes in Alaska can point to numerous examples where our direct role in management has resulted in better outcomes for migratory birds, moose, seals, and marine mammals.

We appreciate Senator Murkowski's work to assist AYK salmon populations through Congressionally-directed spending in support of research, monitoring, and co-management. We also appreciate Senator Murkowski's support for greater Tribal representation on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and leadership in including language in the Fiscal Year 24 Appropriations Bill to reposition the Office of Subsistence Management to the Interior Secretary's Office. Similarly, we are extremely grateful for the Senate's critical work to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which is now funding the Gravel-to-Gravel Initiative—a new initiative co-led by Department of Interior agencies and Tribes to recover salmon and restore their habitat in the AYK region.

Co-management of Tribally-significant species must be broadened to encompass species that are not facing a conservation concern. Currently, cooperative management in our region is only triggered when a conservation concern arises. Tribes should be at the table as co-managers for every species that has relevance to Tribes

and subsistence ways of life, regardless of conservation status. We urge you to push federal agencies to work with us to develop co-stewardship agreements for federally-managed lands and fisheries, on which our Tribes have lived and subsisted for generations.

We especially wish to see greater opportunities for co-management of fishery resources with the NMFS. Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge must be incorporated into federal fisheries monitoring, research, management, and regulatory decisionmaking processes. Emphasis should be placed on co-production of knowledge; bringing Tribal leaders and TK-holders into the research and information-gathering process early on; and, importantly, seating TK-holders at management tables to bring TK to decisionmaking processes.

For co-management to succeed, words and intentions must be backed up with dollars. It is critical that statements in support of co-management and co-stewardship be paired with concrete resources to support co-management efforts in Alaska. Dedicated, stable, and non-competitive annual funding for each regional Tribal fisheries co-management organization, and any other Tribal organization engaged in co-management of living resources, is needed to support co-management operations.

Tribes are also in need of resources to participate in the fishery management and science process. Tribes in the Yukon and Kuskokwim regions must have access to non-competitive resources and training to support implementation of long-term community-based monitoring of salmon abundance and harvest.

#### **Consultation on All Decisions Affecting Tribally-Significant Resources**

As the witnesses to this hearing confirmed during the question-and-answer portion of the field hearing's panel, the AYK Region has seen little engagement from the Department of Commerce—specifically NMFS—on matters of co-stewardship and including Alaska Native Tribes in fisheries management. We support increasing co-stewardship efforts with NMFS, including through the emerging Gravel-to-Gravel Initiative. At a minimum, we have asked NMFS to initiate Tribal Consultation on all decisions regarding Bering Sea fisheries and related resources. Consultation has historically been underused by the agency and the Alaska Regional Office. Going forward, NMFS must ensure that Tribes are consulted on all decisions regarding Bering Sea fisheries and related resources, as we are the Alaska families directly impacted, and told to sacrifice.

Until Tribal seats are added to the NPFMC, as well as afterward, the results of those Consultations must be considered by the agency's voting representative on the NPFMC and incorporated into Council decisionmaking with findings.

#### **Tribal Representation in the Management Process**

We strongly support adding two voting Tribal seats, appointed by the Tribes, to the NPFMC via MSA Reauthorization. We also strongly support Tribal representation on all advisory bodies, committees, and plan teams that support the NPFMC's decisionmaking. We support expanded Tribal representation on the Federal Subsistence Board (FSB). Currently the FSB membership is imbalanced, in favor of federal agency representatives. We urge DOI to add additional public Tribal seats on the FSB through rulemaking and increase the number of support staff available to support Tribal representatives serving on the FSB.

#### **Fix the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund to better support AYK Salmon**

For Western Alaska salmon populations to have a chance at recovery, NOAA must reform the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund to address other drivers of salmon decline besides habitat loss. PCSRF is currently heavily weighted in favor of endangered salmon stocks in developed or urbanized watersheds. Yet we know salmon decline due to stressors other than habitat loss—this is what we are experiencing in Western Alaska.

The AYK Sustainable Salmon Initiative is doing critical work monitoring and collecting harvest data for declining salmon stocks in our region. But for these efforts to be effective, we need to be able to access PCSRF funding that is sufficient to meet in-region research and restoration needs. With its myopic focus on habitat and populations that are on the brink of extinction, PCSRF is ill-equipped to help salmon weather the growing impacts of climate change.

#### **Conclusion**

The salmon crisis affecting the AYK Region has far-reaching impacts that touch the mental health, physical wellbeing, food security, and cultural expression of Tribes and subsistence communities. Our people are consistently made to bear the full burden of conservation for declining salmon stocks, while the state and federal governments prioritizes the economic profits of commercial fisheries over the food

security of river communities. Tribal participation in the fishery management process, especially through co-management, offers a promising path forward to safeguard the health of AYK salmon populations, but we need help to secure Tribal representation on the NPFMC, bring federal agencies like NOAA and NMFS to the table, and ensure stable funding exists to support co-management. We also urge you to act to safeguard our subsistence ways of life, which are currently under threat.

We stand ready to work with the members of this Committee, and all members of the United States Senate, to recover AYK salmon populations and ensure healthy lands and waters region-wide.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF BEVERLY HOFFMAN

Senator, Lisa

Quyana to everyone who has come to Bethel today to hear us! My name is Beverly Hoffman, I was born and raised in Bethel Alaska and have worked hard to be a good steward of our land and water. I am a subsistence gatherer and have been for all my life. It saddens me we have come to this place in time. For too many years our fish racks have been empty leaving us frustrated our hearts saddened.

I'm 72, I have sat on Fishery advisory councils both state and Federal as well as the North Pacific Marine Fishery Advisory council. I stay informed of all these groups even today including the Kuskokwim Intertribal Fish Commission.

We have been talking about the reasons for our salmon declines for over two decades. Trawlers, climate changes, mining risks. So now we are at a crucial point in time. We, the people of the YK Region have been restricted from fishing for King Salmon while trawlers continue to throw this same salmon overboard. That crab, halibut and other species are also affected.

For many years we have testified to protect our food. We are the real stewards of the land, the water the oceans pleading for something to be done. There is much I want you and policy makers to do. First, address the specific waste of the Trawling industry. The industry is destroying the ocean nutrients overfishing.

Our Yukon and Kuskokwim ecosystem depend on healthy salmon spawning rivers. We lose our salmon, we lose everything we love here.

Second, there must be reform in fishery management on both state and federal levels as there is more emphasis on commercial operations and very little protecting our way of life and the gathering of our subsistence foods. I felt relieved to hear you address that at AFN.

Third it is disheartening to see large extraction open pit mines like Donlin and others being developed on our salmon spawning rivers. I request we doing a new Environmental Impact Statement on Donlin. Climate change has caused warming temperatures that impact our salmon. We need that new data. The risk is too great.

It is my HOPE that what you hear today will make a difference in your decision-making and you will use your voice to protect all that we love in our region. All that keeps us here despite the high cost of fuel and the price of our groceries. This land and the Kuskokwim River is our food source and you policy makers must do all you can to work with us and protect us as we continue to fight for our very existence. Quyana.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE ALEUT CORPORATION (TAC)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony by The Aleut Corporation (TAC) concerning declining salmon numbers and fisheries in our region.

The Aleut Corporation (TAC) is the regional Alaska Native corporation representing the Unangax - Aleut region. TAC's mission is to maximize dividends and opportunities for our shareholders. Many of those opportunities revolve around the fisheries in our communities. Our current and primary economy is fish.

As Alaska Natives, we deeply empathize with the challenges communities of the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) region are facing and understand the urgency with which these issues must be addressed. We need to come together with a unified voice to demand solutions. Any solution that allows for the cutting down of another region based in fear, or sacrificing one community's livelihood for another is unacceptable and counterproductive.

Harvest data and science tell us that the Area M chum catch numbers will not solve the Western Alaska chum failures. We encourage the Committee to seek out the information and use that information to formulate possible solutions. Simply closing or further restricting Area M fisheries will only devastate more families who do not have economic or subsistence alternatives. Claims surrounding inflated chum bycatch numbers in Area M have been contradicted by state biologists, emphasizing

the importance of relying on verified data. The opposition to closing the Area M fishery by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game is based on evidence linking poor marine smolt survival to changing oceanic conditions—not the fisheries in Area M. Efforts to address the AYK fishery crisis should not come at the expense of dismantling other small fishing communities.

Our Unangax communities are also enduring declines in our fisheries as well as experiencing structural roadblocks to realizing the benefit of our fisheries resource. We continue to see those impacts on our smaller communities, resulting in reduced budgets, families leaving tribal homes, and school closures. Instead of seeking scapegoats, we should embrace voluntary industry-led efforts for expanded research, and innovative management approaches that consider the long-term impacts on all communities.

The decline in salmon numbers in the AYK region highlight a more profound, existential threat. Issues like ocean acidification, climate change, and ecosystem destabilization fuel the urgent need for a united front to find sustainable solutions. Depriving communities of their livelihoods will not address the root causes of the AYK crisis but instead exacerbate the challenges we collectively face.

The Aleut Corporation urges a collaborative, science-based approach that fosters unity and addresses the real sources of our challenges. We believe by working together to find solutions that benefit all communities, rather than resorting to divisive measures that undermine our collective strength, is the only viable way to address this situation.

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views and stand ready to engage with others to find a solution to these challenging issues.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF JANET B.

I sent this same comment to AFN for a resolution they did. I'm sending it to this as well. It's my plea for Federal Government to take action.

I'm from the village of Platinum. Tribal administrator and a tribal member of the Platinum Traditional Village tribe. Though this comment is my personal comment.

We are seeing declines in so much of our subsistence gathering. From plants, to fish, to big game and birds. Usually we can pick 30 gallons of blackberries or more (officially Western calls it crowberries). This year we couldn't even pick 4 gallons. We can usually get a lot of salmon but now it's only those who can use boats who can get an abundance of salmon (our family was fortunate to be given salmon from other families) not the traditionally set nets we normally do because of the seaweed abundance on our set nets. Our Bay used to freeze from September to May, last year it did not freeze all the way all year. When I was younger we could get five caribou per person if we wanted but my family never took more than two, and it's been closed for a few years now because caribou numbers are low. Moose is open, but unless you have a reliable way of transportation, you can't catch moose easily. In our area, we never reach our quota.

Our land is changing a lot, this needs to be studied and taken into account. We need our subsistence way of life. Especially since we have no post office (we have to cross the dangerous unfrozen bay to get our mail) we can't supplement as much dry goods for when we can't get much subsistence because we have to freight everything in which gets too expensive.

They say we are on the YK Delta. But my family has family in both Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay Area, all who rely on subsistence. My parents lived in this great state before statehood. Every region matters, and our village has regulations from both regions depending on the office..

I used to work for the State, it's amazing what some people don't notice you when you are not in a higher position. The things you hear. I am calling on our federal authorities to find federal managers for our area to be local, not from out of State. Hearing a federal manager not wanting to work with the State and not to do aerial surveys for our moose, while yes, during Covid but to actually say "people care more about the salmon than the do about the moose". It's obvious that their federal manager who came to Bethel for likely three years to have their highest wages be their monthly for their retirement say those words makes him highly unaware of how connected to all forms of subsistence our people rely on. Salmon is very important because it's what is usually more abundant, but out in expensive rural Alaska, every subsistence activity is important. From gathering, to hunting and fishing. Hire someone local who is going to stay longer than three years. Thankfully, they gave in and did the aerial surveys with the State that year.

While I'm glad our locals are on the fish commission. I do know that they had wanted to keep our subsistence salmon closed on the Kuskokwim when it could be

less restricted because they wanted to keep control and not give that “control” to the State. This isn’t right, when it can be open, open it to less restrictions, no matter who ends up in charge. This is why I want transparency where any meetings whether federal, state, or local be available for the public. This is the only way to ensure that what is being decided is best for the people and for our land and waters. Not because anyone wants to in a high position of “power”. Transparency will keep officials accountable for their actions.

We need some way to ensure our salmon is not going to die off. Figure out how the oceans are changing (as well as how much international trawlers are affecting the habitats, I read that some countries added additional trawlers that don’t have bycatch restrictions as our own do). We need the federal government to continue to move fast as they can on the chemical recently noticed in tires that kills coho and trout. If we can do more resolutions that can go to our national level for something like this that affects more than our fish populations (they did testing in Anchorage which has the road run off affecting salmon in one of those streams which is disconcerting when Anchorage does not have as much traffic as someplace like Seattle). Native Alaskans are struggling with their food security and our cultural way of life. We will stand up and be heard even if it takes years.

I don’t know if my comment will be seen by many, but I hope it can reach those who can make changes we need. Because something needs to change so those who rely on the the land and water can continue to survive, and pass on to the younger generations what should rightfully be theirs.

Thank you for your time.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF GLORIA SIMEON

The United States Government is the trustee of all matters pertaining to American Indians and Alaska Natives. This includes our very being, our tribal rights, our land and resources as well as our health, education and welfare. Furthermore, to protect these rights for generations to come. This obligation is a trust responsibility.

The United States has the most laws to protect the environment and agencies to enforce these laws. The fact is these laws have actually hastened environmental degradation and oppression and are made to favor industry. These agencies have sole discretion to issue permits. We have found that they are not always neutral in granting their permissions.

The State of Alaska, as we know, is controlled pro-extraction industry. Pro-development and industry are prioritized over the best interests of the 229 Tribes and their Native citizens. Decisions are made impacting us and our ability to survive on our own Homelands. Laws and regulations are passed, threatening our access to resources we have relied on since time immemorial, threatening not only our survival, but the survival of our future generations.

Regionally, our own regional, sub-regional and village corporations also threaten our survival. When Tribal interests and survival are in conflict with the ANSCA corporations and resource development, corporations win. At what cost? What do we truly lose when we lose our land, water and the food that sustains us? We belong to this land. It has sustained us for millennia. We have nowhere else to go. Subsistence is not a “way of life” it is our Life.

The looming threats to our survival and ability to access our resources are:

- Climate change
- Deep sea trawling and bycatch allocations
- Proposed Donlin

These are a threat to our ability to subsist on our traditional and customary foods, most importantly, salmon. We are still discovering far reaching ripple effects of climate change. The skin of our tundra has become very thin and unstable, our river banks are eroding at an alarming rate, increasingly hot summers have left our land vulnerable to lightening strikes and fire.

Mitigation can be achieved with trawling and extraction based development that threatens the first People of this land.

Deep sea trawl by-catch can be controlled by regulation as well as stopping development of the proposed Donlin mine. This is not the time or the place to develop the world’s largest open pit gold mine on the backs of the Tribal Nations of this region.

These Nations have already spoken. In 2019, 35 Tribal Nations of the AVCP region, opposed the proposed Donlin open-pit mine. Let their voices be heard. Failure to do so is a death blow to my River, My People and our survival.

## PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSEPH ASULUK

Yaa quyana Lisa Murkowski, if you have a translating earphones, would you please put them on? I'm not going to put my own language aside, I'm going to speak my own language. Quyana.

Qit'vallagayuumiitua, man'a qitevcaraq wii pikenritaqa, tua-i amlleerriiq, amlleerriiq. Wangkuta nerangnaqelriani amlleerriiq tua-i. Ukuk Kuigpiinkuk Kusquqvak-llu neqait, Kuigpiinkuk Kusquqvak-llu yuita pinritait. Amlleerriiq. Atauciurriluta callugnaurtukut ampi. Atam umyuaqeqerciu, umyuaqeqerciu una wani, Kuigpiinkuk, Kuigpagmun Kusquqvagmun-llu neqet tailartut qurrsarturluteng, qaa? Yaa? (Audience: Yaa, yaa). Tua-i-llu qurrluteng, spawn-arluteng Kuigpiinkuk Kusquqviim-llu kangritni. Wangkuta-llu avaken ayagluki neqeksaaqluki. Quyamalaryaarluta taikata wangkuta aturarkauluki. Atam umyuaqeqerciu, trawlers- qalurpagalriit, anglanitekluta, tuarpiag, wangni. Wangkuta assirluki piyaaqelput kankut trawlers, kankut kanani cagmarluki neqput. Tua-i ampi Lisa, calluutesqumakut. Wangkuta ukvekluten pikartelaramteggan allat-llu. Taumek wangkuta ampi tupagnariakut qavarpegnata. Qavanricaaqukut, taugaam erinangnariakut ataucimek. Wangkuta unguvaurngaitukut, unguvaurngaitukut wangkuta. Ukut irniarput tutgarauriluput-llu irniarqkait-llu paitarkaitnek ampi pinaurtukut, kankut uitatevkenaki. Nallunritaqa kankut qalurpatulit uum, cam anguyagtem pisciigatlikait akililaata. Wangkuta-llu akimek piilamta niicugnimangacuunata. Piciunganani tamana wiinga taringvaguallenni. Ampii tupagnaurtukut. Ataucim erinakluta, ampi erinaput una uitatevkenaku pingnauraput. Kiingan tuaten pitaqerluku, taugaam quyana Lisa tailuten maavet Mamterillermun niicugnilita-llu. Quyana.

I don't want to speak in English, it is not mine, it is enough, it's enough. For us that are subsistence users, it is enough. The fish of these two rivers in Yukon and Kuskokwim are not the result of the Yukon and Kuskokwim people. It is enough. We need to start fighting as one. Think of this, the fish come to Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers to spawn. Right? Yes? Audience: Yes, yes. Then the fish spawn in the headwaters of Yukon and Kuskokwim River. And they have been our source of food since then. We are thankful for them to use them when they arrive. Think of this, trawlers, trawlers are making fun of us, to me, I think. What we make use in the right way, the trawlers down there are wasting our fish. This is enough, Lisa, we want you to fight for us. We voted you in with trust, as well as others. It is time for us to wake up and not sleep. We aren't sleeping, but we need to have one voice. We will not live forever; we will not live forever. We need to leave a legacy for our children, our grandchildren and for their children, by not leaving them (trawlers) alone. I know those trawlers, the Federal doesn't do anything to them because they pay. And for us, since we don't have money, we don't seem to be heard. That seems to be true to my understanding. We need to wake up now. Have one voice, let's start to have our voice be heard now. This is all but thank you Lisa for coming here to Bethel and listen to us. Quyana.

## PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN FOSTER, PRESIDENT, UNGA TRIBAL COUNCIL

Dear Chairman Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, and members of the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs:

After listening to testimony, earlier this month regarding the salmon declines in the Arctic, Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers (AYK) from the Indigenous Alaskans pleading for change is vital to the wellbeing of Alaska Native people; however, some concerns brought forth are misleading and untrue and we would like to highlight some of those misconceptions.

Oral testimony's coming forth targeting another group of Indigenous people is of grave concern to our Aleut people who reside in the Eastern Aleutians who participate in the salmon fishery of Area M, a fishery our Indigenous tribal members utilize for both subsistence and commercial use. It also never ceases to amaze us that for the past forty plus years our Indigenous people have had to stand up and defend our way of life and the natural resources (salmon) that surround and consume us.

First we would like to point out that we sympathize with the salmon declines in the AYK region. We would also like to point out that our native fishermen have faced adverse obstacles that have been put forth by other areas around the State of Alaska whenever fish are missing from another area, we Eastern Unangan Aleuts are automatically blamed for conservation problems occurring within other areas.

For our Indigenous Unangax fishermen fishing in the Eastern Aleutians of Area M our fishery is important to the Economic welfare of our people, our communities, our food source, and our livelihood and mainstay economy.

While some claim that the Area M fishery must be shut down or severely reduced to ensure the survival of other fisheries, the science simply does not support this type of plan. Our fishermen the past couple years have taken voluntary actions to minimize potential impact on chum salmon, small as it may be on AYK chums.

ADF&G reports that South Alaska Peninsula June harvest rates were 2.1 percent, 3.6 percent and 6.9 percent in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively, for the entire CWAK group which extends from Bristol Bay to Norton Sound. This is an average harvest rate of 4.2 percent.

The issues of AYK Arctic Yukon Kuskokwin crisis will not be solved by shutting down or severely reducing our indigenous fishermen's live hoods in order to ensure the survival of other fisheries. Research strongly states poor smelt survival is likely to the changing oceanic conditions, extreme warm ocean temperatures, the lack of available food sources all contributing to a decline in fish, notably not the fishery we are dependent upon, the Area M Fishery. Area M has a total of 224 salmon streams, 136 of these streams are local chum salmon streams.

Salmon declines are complex in nature, our oceans are huge, the diminishing of a species is complex in nature, accurate representation of data and science must be central to any decisions regarding a fishery, entailing a larger scope of area not targeting one specific area.

Our fishery small in nature has been in existence since time immemorial, it is not just the economics of our fishery but a vital part of our history and without access to the salmon fishery we utilize we too can become history. We are all culturally dependent upon the salmon fishery. Subsistence is part of our fishery.

It is our hopes that more scientific research will become available and appropriated to the understanding of the migration of our salmon resources and our salmon runs so that the best developed science based solutions will become available for our vital salmon resources within the entire State of Alaska.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on a vital resource the salmon for all our indigenous native people.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF VIVIAN KORTHUIS, CEO, ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE  
COUNCIL PRESIDENTS

My name is Vivian Korthuis. I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the Association of Village Council Presidents.

I would like to thank Senator Murkowski, members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and your staff for organizing this field hearing to hear directly from our Tribes.

When AV CP, Kawerak, TCC, and AFN first made a request for a Congressional Field Hearing in September 2021, we were two years into the crash. Now we are in year four.

This empty bag represents empty smokehouses and freezers across Western Alaska in our villages.

The crash has been devastating for families and communities in the AYK Region, involving more than 100 tribal communities.

Just in our region alone 30,000 people are being impacted.

Some may think that what's happening in our villages is insignificant, but it's jeopardizing the Way of Life of over 100,000 people.

What's happening in our villages is unfair—our subsistence fishing has the least impact on the salmon crash, yet we are the only ones being restricted and prevented from practicing our Way of Life.

No one else is being asked or told to make changes.

We need immediate action to find solutions to this crisis. That won't happen unless the Federal Government is willing to listen to and partner with Tribes.

It will take a holistic approach to make changes that will allow the salmon to recover. Everyone has a role to play.

I believe that the AYK Salmon Crash is the test for the Arctic Strategy for the federal government.

The 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) emphasizes four pillars: advancing U.S. security interests, climate change mitigation and environmental protection, economic development, and international cooperation and governance.

Alaska is the geopolitical center of the Arctic for the United States. The Salmon Crash in our region is a test of the United States' ability to respond to a crisis in the Arctic.

How will the United States mitigate the impact of changes in our environment and protect and restore the salmon?

To the rest of the country, we are located on the “edge of the map”. In my mind, I want to make sure that Tribes in Alaska, even if we live in the most remote parts of the United States, matter.

Our tribes matter. Subsistence matters. Our villages matter. Salmon matter. We cannot be ignored any longer.

Senator Murkowski and Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, thank you for listening to us. Thank you for showing that our voices matter.

Thank you.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRIAN LEFFERTS, BETHEL RESIDENT

Thank you for hosting this hearing, and accepting this written testimony. I’m writing from my home in Bethel, where I have lived for 18 years with my family. As a non-Alaska Native resident, I want to acknowledge that I live in the traditional homeland of the Yup’ik people of the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, who called this land home for thousands of years before it was a part of the United States.

From my perspective as someone not from this region, I’ve observed the crucial role salmon has to the Yup’ik people. It’s not just a source of food but a cornerstone of their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, deeply ingrained in their culture. Over the last century, with the arrival of outsiders and the introduction of government-imposed hunting and fishing restrictions, there’s been a significant shift from the millennia-old local traditions that were essential ways of life, and deeply embedded in the culture. These traditions which influenced every aspect of their identity as individuals and as a people.

These traditions are not just important to Elders from the region. As a volunteer coach for a First Lego League robotics team at the Yup’ik Immersion School, Ayaprun Elitnaurvik, I’ve seen firsthand how deeply these traditions are valued by our youth as well. This year they were asked to do a project that describes something they love. The middle school teams I mentor chose to focus their on project this year on hunting and Yuraq (Yup’ik dancing), reflecting their cultural heritage. Their passion for Yuraq, with its deep historical and cultural ties, reflect how important the connection to subsistence is to the young people from this region.

The decline in salmon populations, influenced by decisions made far from the YK Delta, is causing significant health and economic disparities in the region. I’m not in a position to propose solutions for the salmon crisis, but I want to emphasize the U.S. government’s obligation, based on its historical agreements, to ensure the wellbeing of the indigenous population. This commitment isn’t being fully met, despite some progress in areas like the recent funding for broadband and sanitation facilities construction through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which we are truly grateful for.

The region faces serious issues, such as the nation’s highest rates of household crowding needing its own IIJA level funding increase to address. There’s also a constant need for medical providers, teachers, and other professionals, underscoring the importance of investing in education to train local Alaska Natives for these roles. And, while we appreciate the funding for rural sanitation systems, sustained operational and maintenance funding (approximately \$70 million annually) is critical for their affordability and accessibility throughout rural Alaska.

This hearing may focus on salmon, but it’s vital to recognize that the U.S. government’s responsibilities extend beyond co-management of salmon in the rivers and at sea. They include supporting housing, healthcare, infrastructure, education, and economic development. The control over land use, once exclusively in the hands of its original inhabitants, heavily impacts their health and wellbeing. Adequately funding other programs that also impact health and well being are an immediate step we can take to improve the situation while addressing the salmon crisis. Quyana.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHARLIE BROWN, RESIDENT, GOLOVIN, ALASKA

My name is Charlie Brown,

I live in Golovin, Alaska. I have been a witness to the salmon crash as it progressed more noticeably since the 1980’s. Once a robust fishery by any standards, Golovin Bay boasted the lion’s share of chum salmon, pink salmon, and even a fair share of coho salmon and a number of Chinook and sockeye also topped off our fishery on the Northern Norton Sound in Golovin Bay.

A 1987 chum salmon tagging study done on the Alaska Peninsula revealed that a significant amount of chum, after running the gauntlet of the Area M fishery including passing through Bristol Bay area fisheries made their way up to many river



systems including the Yukon, Kuskokwim, (AYK) and Norton Sound. That particular year Japanese processing vessels were anchored along many of the coastal fishing communities from the AYK to Norton Sound. As we delivered the tagged salmon to the processors, the Japanese crew took samples from the tagged salmon and cataloged each sample. We now have reports from NOAA that a majority of the salmon caught around the Alaska Peninsula are now of Asian descent. A coincidence of samples taken from the 1987 tagging study?

In Both State and Federal Waters, the salmon are taken as bycatch from trawling activity and intercepted primarily by purse seiners that have had no previous rights to the waterways of the salmon migration route around the Alaska Peninsula. Both State and Federal fisheries management have failed Alaskans miserably because policies adopted by congress state that under TITLE 16 CHAPTER 38–1801. **Findings, purposes and policy (a) Findings**

(10) Pacific Insular Areas contain unique historical, cultural, legal, political, and geographical circumstances which make fisheries resources important in sustaining their economic growth.

In an attempt to leave out the rest of Alaskan communities this seems to stand out as if to favor a special interest group of people that hold over 80 percent of the commercial fishing permits on the Alaska Peninsula with no residency in Alaska. An Alaskan based fishery. This special interest group also tied to interest in industry level self governance regulatory boards that make the management decisions.

This is happening on both the state and federal levels of management and this needs to change, more focus is needed to start the conservation at the beginning of the migratory rout of salmon in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea areas of the Alaska Peninsula.

The salmon resources belong to Alaskans, not special interest newcomers with dual residency in other states and nations.

This map shows the areas that are most heavily over fished, over fishing is the reason for salmon declines more so than selective science has proven. (map retained in Committee files.)

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF BORIS L. EPCHOOK, CHAIRMAN, KWETHLUK INDIAN REORGANIZATION ACT COUNCIL OF THE ORGANIZED VILLAGE OF KWETHLUK

I would like to thank U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski and the US Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for holding this Field Hearing on the “Impacts of Historic Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities Along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers”, and Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) for hosting and providing the facilities for this purpose.

Impacts of Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers has been disastrous for more than four decades resulting in the loss of a subsistence salmon harvesting culture passed down through generations, conversion to more consumption of processed and preserved foods through other sources of retail venues in substitute for our traditional subsistence food sources.

Salmon is still a main source of diet for tribes of the Yukon and Kuskokwim River region that are allowed to harvest during authorized subsistence salmon harvest openers depending on the projected escapement of the targeted salmon species, by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Services, Subsistence Management Division.

Through loss of seasonal subsistence salmon harvesting opportunities, and increased consumption of non-traditional foods processed through factories and shops has its effects on the health of the tribal peoples of the Yukon and Kuskokwim River region.

From previous years there has been an increase in cancer, diabetes, and obesity patients in the YK Delta Region due to a loss of our ability to supplement our diet by consumption of traditional wild game and salmon previously practiced by our people. Well-Being and mental health, stress, and anxiety over subsistence salmon harvest opportunities has its effects on individuals who wish to continue and pass on the practice of Subsistence Salmon Harvest opportunities for their children and grandchildren. This is contributing to the loss of cultural identity.

Kwethluk (Kuiggluk) is no stranger to “Restrictions”, “Moratoriums”, and “Conservation” efforts as our ancestors have practiced and engaged in resource management long before the Europeans and other settlers stepped foot on this land.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the US Fish and Wildlife Services, the State of Alaska and our US Congressional Delegates failed to hear our concerns since the Chum Salmon crashes in the mid to late 1980’s. Thereafter the King Salm-

on crash of the 1990's beginning long imposition of restrictions and conservation efforts for people who normally rely on salmon to supplement their diet.

The congressional act of 1977, the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation Management Act, although beneficial for "coastal" villages, is disastrous for in-river villages that are asked to conserve for the shake of profit. Our conservations efforts don't matter. . . out of sight, out of mind.

The Kwethluk River is one of a few prime spawning rivers in the Kuskokwim River, and for that reason and for the next generation we've been compliant with restrictions and conservation efforts, but sometimes for practicing subsistence salmon harvests, our people become criminals by being ticketed, taken to court, and their gear confiscated.

In my observation the heavily restricted region in the Kuskokwim River are the villages of Akiachak, Akiak, Tuluksak, and Kwethluk. Why is that imposed when upriver villages above Tuluksak and downriver villages from Kwethluk continue to practice their seasonal summer salmon harvests? What's wrong with this picture? Conservations efforts should be practiced by all stakeholders of these resources.

Regional, State, National, and International Salmon Multi-Use Agreements need to be sought and considered with consumers of the Salmon Resources in the Pacific Rim. Climate change has also recently impacted the dwindling salmon stocks with changes in weather pattern, and pollutants from humans and various seafaring vessels.

The originating anadromous rivers from which these salmon resources begin, Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers need to be considered by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Services by establishing adequate "by-catch" limits since there is always salmon mortalities in these activities. Thank you for the time and opportunity to comment on this issue.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHARITON EPCHOOK, PRESIDENT, KWETHLUK  
INCORPORATED BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Thank you for the opportunity to make comments on the by-catch issues, I'm Chariton Epchook, President of the Kwethluk Incorporated Board of Directors.

Organized Village of Kwethluk, Kwethluk IRA Council, Kwethluk Incorporated, Board of Directors and the other AVCP Unit 4 Village Representatives have been active on the issues of salmon returns to the Kuskokwim River and more specifically to the Kwethluk, Kasigluk and Kiseralik Rivers (Tri-K Rivers). We participated in early 2000 when we discussed the Area M commercial fisheries when we started seeing declines in salmon going up the Tri-K Rivers and asked the Federal Board at that time to declare a 5-year moratorium on salmon in that area. The moratorium worked by still we were seeing salmon numbers declining within the next 10 years. At that time, trawl fisheries should have been included in the moratorium.

We are currently seeing once again salmon numbers declining in both major rivers (Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers) and it is more evident in the Yukon River where our relatives were not permitted to harvest and put away salmon. We approached the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council in 2010 and requested that bycatch of salmon heading for the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers be lowered. As we all know, money talks so NPFMC did not honor our request.

Most recently, our AVCP Unit 4 Village representatives attended the State Fisheries meeting in Anchorage and once again, the governing board sided with the Fisheries and trawlers since we the people along the Yukon and Kuskokwim do not pay for commercial and trawl fishing permits or licenses.

In the last two years, we seen our people dying of various cancers because we are forced to buy processed food from our local stores, because our people do not eat what they have grown up eating, salmon dry fish and other wild red meat (moose caribou and bear). We are so restricted that we cannot set a net on the Kwethluk River while Commercial and Trawl Fisheries continue to catch and throw salmon overboard that may have been heading to the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. We cannot set our nets so that sports fishermen can go up the Tri-K rivers and have fun with salmon and other fish that we usually stored for long winters. The fish camps along the Kwethluk River are no longer being occupied throughout the summer (only a few families stay at camps), where I used to see families working together to catch, cut, hang/dry and smoke their catch of salmon.

In closing, how can Congress help the first people of Alaska? Congress must either repeal the Magnuson Stevens Act or make amendments that reflect Title VIII of ANILCA, subsection 804, Preference for Subsistence Use and close all high seas fisheries when projected salmon runs into the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers are low. If either do not happen, the government that people entrust to protect will not show

promise, but send a feeling of failure to the people, mainly because of the food that we are forced to buy and eat leading again to a great death of our people as history has shown it.

Thank you again for giving me this opportunity to provide comments.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF GEORGE GUY, GENERAL MANAGER, KWETHLUK, INC.

For the record, my name is George Guy, General Manager of Kwethluk, Inc.

Through blood, sweat and tears we try to feed our families through Native Subsistence wild fish and game renewable resources. I served as co-chair of the “Alaska Bycatch Review Task force”—Western Alaska Salmon Sub committee. For the term I served I attended every meeting as a Subsistence Representative. As we voice our concerns, recommendations to Federal and State of Alaska agencies regarding Kuskokwim Subsistence Salmon Fishing restrictions, Alaskan Natives have a right under ANCSA; Title VIII—ANILCA to partake in our customary and traditional rights of Fish and Game Resources. Yet we, the first people are denied to subsistence fishing. We are told when, where, time to fish and when we break the laws we the over regulated natives are labeled as criminals. Why not the Trawlers of the Bering Sea redeemed as salmon bounded for Yukon-Kuskokwim Tributary Rivers be labeled as criminals as they are authorized “salmon bycatch” on trawlers. It is money for them, food security for Yukon-Kuskokwim Subsistence people. No equal justice for all. Don’t forget the Katy John case. It is imperative to hand over the reins from the explicit trawlers to subsistence people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Rivers.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF JENNIFER HOOPER, NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGER,  
ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS

Senator Murkowski and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jennifer Hooper and I reside in Bethel on the Kuskokwim River and work for the Association of Village Council Presidents. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts and recommendations I have. I attended the hearing and was signed up to testify but I waived my time due to time constraints and I wanted to make sure that others who had traveled in would have time to speak.

First, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives and impacts of the salmon crises. We are here to provide a sense of how serious the situation is and what some of our priorities are. As stewards of the land and waters for 1000s of years we know the natural cycles and we understand what conservation means. We have seen changes across our entire ecosystem and know climate change is affecting every aspect of the food chain.

Senator Murkowski, we appreciate your support for congressionally directed spending for AYK salmon populations and are grateful for your work on the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. We also appreciate your support for Tribal representation at the NPFMC and your leadership on the FY24 Appropriations Bill to shift OSM. Today, we want you to understand the importance of Tribal voices, Local & Traditional Knowledge and cooperative management in fishery management processes and the critical importance of action now that can make a difference in the survival of salmon and our tribes.

Right now, today, subsistence communities are the only stakeholders being forced to sacrifice. We can work together to share the burden and broaden the knowledge base used to solve the crisis. Federal fishery managers should not be admonishing our recommendations and pleas because they are not “practicable” and would be a burden on and reduce profits for a billion-dollar industry and would not make a difference anyway. We want to be at the table. If the State reigned in the Area M fishery a little and the federal trawl sector took more steps to avoid salmon, we would be offering salmon returning to Western Alaska a better chance to survive. BUT we have no voice.

I would like to share some specific asks with you, many of which you heard from multiple testifiers during the Hearing:

- We need to develop stronger co-management relationships between the Tribes and federal agencies, and not just when we are in times of conservation. Co-management is the best path for ensuring our declining stocks stabilize and recover while we safeguard the rich culture of our Tribes and subsistence communities. We need to be at the table as co-managers.

- Indigenous and traditional knowledge must be incorporated into federal fisheries—from monitoring and research to direct management and regulatory authority. Co-production of knowledge and bringing Tribal leaders and knowledge holders from the start is critical.
- Funding is imperative for co-management to succeed—secure, annual, and stable funding is needed at each level of management.
- We need Tribal representation, appointed by Tribes, with voting authority in both the State and federal management processes—from committees and teams, up to the decisionmaking bodies.
- There also needs to be expansion of Tribal representation on the Federal Subsistence Board—add public Tribal seats, along with support staff—equity on par with the agencies.
- Lastly and specifically, the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund program needs to better support AYK salmon. NOAA must reform the Fund to address other drivers of salmon decline besides habitat loss. We are competing against a weighted system that favors endangered salmon stocks in developed areas. We know declines are due to stressors other than habitat loss, especially in Western Alaska.
- The AYK Sustainable Salmon Initiative is doing critical work and must have fair access to PCSRF funding for in-region research and restoration efforts to be effective.

Quyana and thank you for your time and attention.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARK LEARY, RESIDENT, THE KUSKOKWIM

I'm a lifelong resident of the Kuskokwim.

I've served on the State sponsored Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (KRSMWG) as the Upriver Subsistence representative.

I was also a member of the steering committee that led to the formation of the Federal Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC)

I wanted to testify about what we had and what we've lost regarding our salmon runs—not only for your benefit but for the benefit of our young people and the Federal/State fish managers.

Our Federal and State fish managers are all too young to understand what we had and none of them live with us year round. They come here only for the summer salmon season. In fact we seem to change both Federal and State managers every 2 or 3 years. None stay long enough to really understand. The Kuskokwim fishery is just a rung in their career ladder—near the bottom I think.

When I was growing up the Kuskokwim River supported both an 800 member commercial fishery and unlimited subsistence fishing open to everyone all the time except for short periods before, during, and after a commercial opening.

Commercial fishing is long gone on our river and we can barely support a subsistence fishery.

Subsistence fishing is only allowed for short periods a day or two out of the week...

...and this is only after a series of meetings by both state and federal advisory groups.

Our young people are growing up thinking this is the proper way to fish and I hear them expressing gratitude to the managers for “allowing” them to fish these limited openings.

It's sad for older people to witness this acceptance of the tightly controlled and restrictive management of one of our most important food resources.

It reminds me of the movie “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.”

Chief Sitting Bill led his people on a prolonged resistance to being forced onto a reservation—even leading them into Canada for a short time.

They finally surrendered to life on a desolate reservation no longer allowed to practice their traditional way of life.

Instead reservation managers “allowed” young Lakota men the chance to occasionally shoot a scrawny beef cow confined in a corral to feed their families.

The young warriors were proud of this.

The older generation looked on with disgust and a great sadness in their hearts for their lost way of life.

Some say history repeats itself.

I'm fearful that already has.

Thank you.

## PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOLENE NANOUK, RESIDENT, UNALAKLEET

Hello,

First of all, thank you members of the Senate Indian Affairs committee for reading my testimony. For the record, my name is Jolene Nanouk, and I am from the people of Unalakleet and reside in Unalakleet, and I am writing on behalf of myself.

There are issues I would like to address regarding the historic salmon declines and the way the salmon is managed in the State of Alaska, especially along the rivers where the salmon return. I had read a comment that really struck me, and it went something like this, "what is worse? An elder who is unable to eat salmon that he/she grew up with due to closers and no salmon, or a youth who never experienced being able to catch or see a salmon caught in their community?" This really hit home, realizing people in Alaska are not able to harvest or experience having salmon a part of their lives. Due to climate change, with salmon runs affected by bycatch 4-5 years ago, and that affecting this years run, or how warm the weather was during a summer when salmon were floating belly up because of warm river waters that contained low oxygen levels, is very concerning. This year, due to high waters and rain throughout the summer is going to affect that salmon 4-5 years down the road, and we need to prepare for that.

The thought of adaptation management, due to issues such as climate change, low runs, or any other obstacle that may affect our salmon is something we need to consider. This summer for example, when closures in Unalakleet river halted my time to get pink salmon, yes pink salmon, I had to go out when it opened whether or not it was raining, use 4 inch mesh because that is what it is regulated to and only caught female pink salmon. My goal has always been for the male pink salmon, and this regulation of mesh size made me upset because I do not target female pink salmon, I never have. Although I was thankful for my salmon that came into the river, I learned to adapt to cutting and freezing, then taking out the cut salmon to when the weather permits good drying. We have always adapted to doing things to make it work in order to allow us to have food in our freezers for the winter.

When I think about those who were unable to harvest, especially along the Yukon, due to regulations and closures, it bothers me. It bothers me because these closures are taking away a way of life, and that way of life had been passed down from generation to generation. I know the numbers may not be favorable, but for goodness sake, please allow these communities to continue to teach the generations now and future generations how to put away fish. Allow them to have an opening to enable their communities to continue to teach this way of life.

My request would be for adaptation management, co-management with the tribes regarding seats like the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and Federal Subsistence Boards, allowing tribal representation be present and adhere a voice to our way of life with regards to salmon and communities. Issues like resolving a 4 inch mesh size to 5 and ¼ inch mesh, and allowing communities to continue practicing and teaching a lifestyle that had sustained us for generations, teaching how to put away fish, how to show respect to the salmon and teach future generations the importance of being responsible caretakers of our lands, waters and all that it entails to make us who we are. That is our duty as Indigenous people, to make sure we take care of what we have and ensure that it is around for the future. Quyana.

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 PREPARED STATEMENT OF GEORGE SMITH, RESIDENT, SCAMMON BAY

Good morning everyone,

My name is George Smith from Scammon Bay which is a coastal community nestled along the bank of the Kun River.

The Kun River is not necessarily a salmon river as recognized by area biologists. The unintended hardship caused by gear restrictions to 4 inch or less mesh and no longer than 60 feet protect all salmon heading to the Yukon River and for us to target non salmon species (white fish) on the Kun River is sort a ridiculous measure and I can even say discriminatory to the residents of Scammon Bay.

The Kun River is not a tributary of any river system, namely the Yukon and yet, we are heavily restricted on the Kun to even harvest the coveted broadhead whitefish and the chee using 5 to 5 1/2 inch mesh nets that we would normally use to harvest them. They are native to our rivers and lakes and come up every spring to spawn. Salmon, we normally go to the Black River which is a tributary of the Yukon River and where the residents of Scammon Bay would normally get their subsistence and commercial harvest of chum and chinook which we all know now is completely closed for subsistence or commercial salmon fishing but for the 4" mesh nets.

Going back to my comment on discriminatory restrictions on the Kun River, I want to bring to light, the Kuskokwim River and 2 rivers that are tributaries within the river but end in lakes much like the Kun but are exempt from any gear restrictions or even complete salmon closures on Kuskokwim River. The only restrictions that the Johnson and Tunt River have are any unrestricted mesh nets must be at least 100 feet from the confluence (Kuskokwim River). That's my beef.

Otherwise I fully support the restrictions we face to protect all salmon species to make it up the Yukon to spawn. I agree with the science mentioned all the time. There's something going on out in the ocean that are affecting the wild salmon stock.

I believe the farmed Asian and Russian farmed salmon are depleting the already compromised salmon food source caused by climate change.

All I want is an opportunity to harvest the broadhead white fish and chee fish with unrestricted gear type for the same reasons that our brothers on the Johnson and Tunt Rivers are allowed to do outside the Kuskokwim Rivers. The Kun River is no different from them. All the other smaller rivers that branch out from the Kun all end in shallow lakes.

Please help us find a way to be able to get the same recognition as the Johnson and Tunt River and allow us to fish with unrestricted gear type to target especially the broadhead whitefish. The unintended greater hardship caused by the restrictions along the coast line and Yukon River is only compounding the the hardship of not being able to harvest any salmon. If there's any restriction that will benefit the depleted AYK bound salmon stock , it should be on the Area M "intercept" commercial salmon fishery. Chum chucking arrests have been made this summer which is absurd and even a greater waste of any salmon that may be heading to the Yukon or Kuskokwim Rivers.

Thank you for allowing me to speak my mind.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. MICHAEL WILLIAMS, SR., AKIAK NATIVE COMMUNITY  
COMMISSIONER

Good afternoon, my name is Dr. Michael Williams, Sr of Akiak, Alaska in which is located 25 miles upriver from Bethel, Alaska along the Kuskokwim River. I have been fishing all of my life and have seen drastic changes over 60 years. Low salmon runs and the loss of subsistence fishing for many communities has wide-ranging impacts that affect individuals, communities, and entire cultures and ways of living. It is important for the Committee to understand the problems (the lack of returning salmon, changing ecosystems, etc.) and the affects of those problems. I often get emotional when talking about this.

In 1980, Congress enacted the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act ANILCA. Title VIII ("Title 8") of ANILCA protects critical subsistence hunting and fishing rights. In Title VIII of ANILCA, Congress recognized that subsistence is "essential to the Native Peoples physical, economic, traditional, and social existence. In order to ensure these values were protected forever, Congress provided rural residents a priority for customary and traditional, and cultural existence and to non-Native physical, economic, traditional, and social existence. Congress provided rural residents a priority for customary and traditional subsistence uses above other uses above other purposes on federal lands and waters in the State of Alaska. Subsistence users currently live under the system of "dual management" where the State and Federal government each play a role:

- The State is in charge of hunting and fishing management on State lands and State waters in Alaska. State waters extend to 3 miles offshore. State waters also include the portions of rivers that flow over state lands and other non-federal lands.
- In Alaska, the federal government (the Department of the Interior, and Department of Agriculture) manage hunting and fishing on Federal Lands and waters via the Federal Subsistence Board and local Regional Advisory Councils, as required by ANILCA.
- From 3–200 miles offshore, the federal government (Department of Commerce) and the North Pacific Management Council (NPFMC) manage fishing in federal offshore waters and refuge lands.

Our ways of life are linked to the land, rivers, and the Bering Sea ecosystem, which form the foundation of our culture, our food security, and our collective future.

- Salmon play a central role in our cultural, spiritual, nutritional well-being.

- Sharing subsistence salmon harvests is a deeply-held cultural value and ensures that neighbors, elders, widowers, and the entire community are well cared for.
  - Participating in subsistence activities is also fundamental for the transmission of our culture—fish camps are where families learn essential subsistence skills and pass on Traditional Knowledge through generations.
  - The salmon sustain us but also our animal relative, our plant relatives, and the rivers themselves. The lack of salmon has the potential to significantly affect the health of entire river ecosystems.
  - Low salmon runs are a crisis, and it is impossible to put a value on what we are losing. Current fisheries management structures for the most part do not honor our subsistence rights and are unwilling to address the salmon crisis.
  - Since time immemorial, our People relied on our Traditional Knowledge to take care of and steward the rivers so that salmon would return the following summer.
  - We managed the salmon harvest in accordance with our Traditional rules and values, and we managed it well. Yet now State management and disjointed federal management have resulted in this crisis. The State of Alaska has, at every possible turn, worked against federally-protected subsistence rights.
  - When Alaska was still a Territory, at statehood in 1959, and still today, State fish and game managers have prioritized commercial and sport fishing to the detriment of our subsistence resources.
  - The State's version of a "subsistence priority" does not work. It is not limited to local rural residents.
  - The State has fought the subsistence protections in Title VIII for 43 years, since ANILCA was first enacted in 1980.
  - The State is now AGAIN fighting our subsistence rights. In the case U.S. v. Alaska, the State is trying to overturn the Katie John line of cases, which would erase the federal subsistence priority for rural residents. Federal Management is disjointed and does not honor the federal government's trust responsibility as it should to Alaska Tribes.
  - Our tribal communities work cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior on in river management, but fisheries management 3–200 miles offshore is governed by North Pacific Management Council (NPFMC) and the Department of Commerce.
  - Like the Alaska Board of Fisheries, the NPFMC is dominated by members who are employed by or are otherwise loyal to large, private commercial fishing interests. And like State of Alaska, the federal Department of Commerce has done little to restrict powerful commercial fishing interests and protect salmon stocks. Together the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the NPFMC and Department of Commerce have overseen the longterm, catastrophic decline of salmon runs. Yet the burden to save the salmon has been put on us.
  - Over 100 Tribal communities along the Kuskokwim, Yukon, and the Bering Strait regions are suffering from the loss of our fish.
  - We are being restricted to the point of being unable to catch a single salmon while the State and Federal management agencies are carrying business as usual.
  - We, The first stewards of these waters, are forced to bear the burden of conservation while large scale commercial fisheries are allowed to waste tens of thousands of salmon a year as bycatch.
- Dual management of our rivers, sea, and fish is not working. The Federal Government must act.
- Salmon are not just swimming dollar signs, Salmon are our life. They are in our DNA.
  - Congress needs to amend ANILCA to protect, once and for all, Alaska Native and Rural subsistence hunting and fishing rights, and ensure our peoples' ability to co-manage these resources.
  - Congress needs to amend ANILCA to secure our fishing rights in every part of every river in Alaska, just as it always was since before memory.
  - Congress needs to amend ANILCA, the Magnusan-Stevens Act, or draft other legislation to bring cohesion to federal fisheries management—both in-river and at sea—to ensure that commercial fishing activities provide for healthy salmon

stocks and subsistence fishing. What good is the federal trust responsibility if the results in the loss of our fish, our communities, our culture, our lives?

Quyana cakneq for allowing me to ask you to take action right now.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF EMILY COHEN, RESIDENT OF ANCHORAGE

I would like to express my strong support for government aid to be provided toward addressing these devastating declines to Alaska's salmon counts. As a resident of Anchorage, Alaska, I am concerned that there will not be sufficient salmon, a critical species in Alaska's food chain, for today and tomorrow's generations.

I am also concerned on behalf of the Indigenous Peoples of this state, whose cultures are inextricably intertwined with salmon. By allowing this environmental catastrophe to continue without intervening, the United States government will passively be allowing cultural genocide to unfold. If there are no salmon for cultures to harvest, eat, and engage in traditional practices with, there will be severe, long-term impacts to the ability of Alaska Native Peoples to engage in their cultures.

Alaska needs salmon, and salmon need us to intervene and create policy around helping them flourish, return to baseline population counts, and ensure that Alaska Native communities have their rights to harvest them protected.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHRISTINA CHANGSAK, RUSSIAN MISSION

Good Afternoon Senator Lisa and everyone else,

My name is Christina Changsak from Russian Mission. I am a wife, mother, and grandmother.

I am here to testify for the people on the Yukon and Kuskokwim river. I am an active subsistence user that relies on the land and water for our food. We provide for multiple families and we know not to waste and we take only what we need. It has been hard not having smoked fish for many winters, since it is a big part of our diet during winter.

For the Yukon, we should be allowed to use a 6 inch net, not a 4 inch net for subsistence. The 4 inch is just too small for the big Yukon river. I have granddaughters that I want to show how to cut and smoke fish, so the generation can keep going to always rely on subsistence, since the cost of living and cost of food has come up.

I live in a village where the only way in and out is by plane. When the weather is bad for days, the 2 stores in our village have to wait on freight to come in. I do not want to rely on the stores for food, when we can provide from the land and water. Please at least let the Yukon open next fishing season so we can put away some for our winter use.

Thank you.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF LAURELI IVANOFF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIVE PEOPLES ACTION

Native Peoples Action (NPA) is a non-partisan organization dedicated to protecting and strengthening Alaska Native peoples and protecting our Ways of Life. We are committed to addressing and restoring our peoples' inherent rights to hunt, fish, harvest, gather, trap, share, and have ceremony as well as manage and steward our homelands for abundance. Critical to this effort is our commitment to end the criminalization of our Native ways of life. We do this work by being a statewide advocate alongside our Native peoples amplifying their work, voices, and leadership, and advancing our collective priorities as Indigenous people.

Joining us are 28 Alaskans who call for change and amendments that would allow for a path forward with sustainability.

Thank you for taking testimony regarding the salmon declines in the Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers (AYK). Sustainability and relationships of respect with resources and the lands and waters that provide for us are values that must be quickly incorporated into the broken management systems we, as Indigenous Alaskans, plead to for change.

For more than 10,000 years, Alaska Natives have served as stewards and caretakers for the lands and waters. This reciprocal relationship is based on respect, honor, and spiritual balance. However, today, stewardship and caretaking has been challenged by unjust governance structures and the criminalization of practicing traditional ways of life. This has resulted in a highly imbalanced ecosystem. We are



working for and calling for ways to restore this balance. The systems must be overhauled with wild Alaska salmon stock sustainability as the priority.

The decline in salmon throughout the AYK threatens our food sovereignty, our food security, and the culture that has sustained who we are through a tumultuous history. The current management systems have failed rural Alaska Native residents and we ask that you take action:

- Develop and fund co-management—Alaska Tribes have traditional knowledge to share with the federal government and managing bodies when it comes to stewardship of the lands and waters.
- Amend Magnuson-Stevens Act and add two tribal seats to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC)—our voice is missing in this process that impacts us the most and the council is currently industry driven with no regard to Indigenous people or subsistence users.
- Consult with Tribes in the region—until seats are added to the NPFMC, consultation must occur.
- Support and expand current tribal representation on the Federal Subsistence Board—there still is an imbalance of voices and support for tribal seats that needs to be addressed.
- Amend ANILCA to protect Alaska Native and rural subsistence hunting and fishing rights—this will ensure our peoples’ ability to co-manage these resources.
- Amend ANILCA to secure our fishing rights in every part of every river in Alaska—our people cannot continue to be criminalized.
- Amend ANILCA, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, or draft other legislation to bring cohesion to federal fisheries management in-river and at sea—what is happening now is not working.
- Move fisheries from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Interior—this structure isn’t working for the best interest of the people, just industry.

The traditional harvesting culture in Alaska Native communities must continue to remain strong, vibrant and necessary, not only for our livelihood, but for the health, sense of identity, and the food sovereignty we rely upon to pass down a way of life central to who we are as Indigenous Alaskans. Please take action to ensure our future generations continue to know what salmon tastes like, to know what it means to be an Indigenous person, to allow Indigenous people to steward and co-manage resources that have been here since time immemorial.

We need you to take action.

Thank you,

Kami Webster, Unalakleet, AK  
 Kay Wallis, Anchorage, AK  
 Agrafina Baugh, Anchorage, AK  
 Iris Klingler, Anchorage, AK  
 Kacey Hopson, Anchorage, AK  
 Donald Stiles, Nome, AK  
 Elizabeth Ahkivgak, Anchorage, AK  
 Rachel Rae Zander, Kenai, AK  
 Karen Erickson, Fairbanks, AK  
 Jazmyn Vent, Fairbanks, AK  
 Timm Nelson, Unalakleet, AK  
 Analisa Mayo-Ramos, San Antonio, TX  
 Shana Lee, Austin, TX  
 Janessa Esquible, Anchorage, AK  
 Alissa Nadine Rogers, Bethel, AK  
 Hannah Sallee, Fairbanks, AK  
 Stephanie Vattu, Greenacres, FL  
 Maria Legend, Anchorage, AK  
 Tonya Brown, Fairbanks, AK  
 Leah Woods, North Pole, AK  
 Duwayne Johnson, Anchorage, AK  
 Alicia Pankiw, Sacramento, CA  
 Katie Ryan, Bozeman, MT  
 Virginia Fagerstrom, Wasilla, AK  
 Alexis Erikson, Nome, AK  
 Monica Chase, Sitka, AK  
 Natalie Boone, Marshall, NC

Andy Paul, San Diego, CA

