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Testimony on Accessing USDA Rural Development Programs in Native Communities  
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### **Introduction**

Maniilaq Association is an Alaska Native tribal organization representing twelve tribes in Northwest Alaska. We provide health, social and tribal government services through self-governance agreements with the Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). We are pleased to offer testimony on accessing United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development (RD) programs. The RD programs offered are received within our communities through the lens of need and circumstances of our region. With that in mind, we provide introductory remarks on some of the critical interest areas of our region: climate change, clean energy, strategic infrastructure, education and workforce development and tribal consultation.

### **Northwest Alaska Critical Interest Areas**

#### Climate Change

The indigenous Inupiat roots of the people of Northwest Alaska stretch back thousands of years. Our communities have thrived in this remote corner of the globe for generations, and it is the traditional ways of knowing and skills that have carried our people. While other parts of the nation are just beginning to feel the impacts of climate change, Northwest Alaska has been at the forefront of this battle for decades, demonstrating preparedness, adaptation, and resiliency. Rapidly warming weather patterns modify the behavior of the animals and fish, and impacts vegetation we rely on to feed our families. Adapting to this new Arctic reality means changing how we hunt and gather while bringing together traditional knowledge with modern Arctic science to find a logical path forward. We work together, as we have done for millennia, in cooperation with one another.

The State of Alaska is home to 54 percent of America's 12,383 miles of coastline with Northwest Alaska comprising approximately 1,200 of those miles. Four Northwest Alaska communities are located directly on the coast, and seven are within the five major river systems. In addition to coastal erosion, we see the effects of river erosion as ice melts quickly, the rivers rise and erosion cuts away roads, airports, shorelines and changes animal migration routes. After the initial surge, the rivers recede and residents report the rivers are actually lower than in previous years. It has been many years since our communities including

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Kotzebue Qikiqtaruk, Ambler Ivisaappaat, Buckland Nunatchiaq, Deering Ipnatchiaq, Kiana Katyaak, Kivalina Kivaliniq,  
Kobuk Laugviik, Noatak Nautaaq, Noorvik Nuurvik, Point Hope Tikigaq, Selawik Akuligaq, Shungnak Isinnaq

Noatak, Shungnak, Ambler and Kobuk, have had goods delivered by barge, which greatly reduces the cost. In the community of Noatak, the river has eroded major roads, making transportation dangerous to its residents.

Our region is home to the village of Kivalina, one of the world's most visibly impacted communities. Situated on a low-lying barrier island, Kivalina historically was protected from the Chukchi Sea by a layer of thick ice. However, rising global temperatures melted the protective Kivalina ice sheet. Now, fall and winter storms barrel into the community, bringing floods and severe erosion in their wake. Water resources, subsistence foods, critical infrastructure, economic development, education of children, and the overall quality of life is at risk because of a warming environment. Coastal erosion in Kivalina impacts every resident, every day. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers predicts the current village site will be completely uninhabitable within 10 years due to melting ice, coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Building of this road is imperative now for the safety of village residents. It is not within the purview of any federal agency to currently assist and we urge you to designate and give appropriate authority to a federal agency to address community evacuation needs.

Increased partnership, collaboration and funding is increasing in importance as climate change continues to threaten the lives of Americans residing in the Arctic.

### Clean Energy

Renewable energy and innovation has been a key component of the energy picture in Northwest Alaska. A case in point is the Kotzebue Electrical Association (KEA) Wind Farm, the northernmost wind farm in the United States. Since 1997, it has supplemented diesel power in Kotzebue and currently provides 20 percent of the town's electricity needs. Boasting the first utility grade wind farm in the state of Alaska, Kotzebue Electric Association installed three 66-kW turbines in 1997. By 2011, the Kotzebue wind farm had grown to 17 wind turbines and represented the first megawatt of wind power in Alaska. Kotzebue now has a total installed capacity of 2.96 MW of wind, which displaces about 250,000 gallons of diesel every year. Today, the company is looking toward harnessing secondary loads for excess energy by supplying thermal energy to the local hospital and will be installing a utility scale lithium ion battery. Being above the Arctic Circle means there are more daylight hours in the year than in the rest of the U.S. The Northwest Arctic Borough sponsored solar installations in all of the regions communities to lower the cost of water and sewer with funds from the U.S. Department of Interior Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) grants. Solutions like this are helping but costs continue to remain high.

Traditional non-renewable fuels are still needed for generation of electricity and for home heating in rural Alaska. Many Department of Energy programs focus solely on renewable energy. Our region is focused on a coordinated approach that includes hybrid systems designed to reduce diesel consumption and increase use of renewable energy as we recognize this is what will make Arctic projects successful.

### Strategic Infrastructure

As the world directs its focus northward, the U.S. lacks infrastructure in the Arctic. From a strategic perspective, Kotzebue is an ideal location to invest in infrastructure like ports, roads, energy upgrades and

broadband because of its geographic position. Investing in our region will not only benefit the residents of Northwest Alaska today, it will provide the backbone of Arctic Infrastructure essential to national security and economic interests for generations to come.

For more than 30 years, the City of Kotzebue, with support from partner organizations, has been working toward the building of a deep water port south of Kotzebue at Cape Blossom and an 11 mile road connecting our city and port. Currently, the region receives essential items such as fuel, vehicles, building supplies, and dry goods by barge and lightering service in Kotzebue. All village-bound products are transported from Kotzebue by small boat or airplane. The shallow-water lightering adds greatly to the cost of goods in Kotzebue and all of its outlying villages. The Cape Blossom Port will provide economic relief to all of the communities in Northwest Alaska by reducing the need for lightering. Moreover, the Cape Blossom Port is uniquely positioned in a safe harbor area that will allow the U.S. Coast Guard and other emergency response resources to respond to ship groundings, vessel emergencies and oil spills in the Arctic. A port at Cape Blossom will provide the United States a strategic location in the Arctic for future opportunities.

### Education and Workforce Development

Currently the unemployment rate for Alaska is 6.9%. Northwest Arctic's is 250% of the State of Alaska rate. In some villages up to 70% of the adults do not work. The workforce needs education and specific job training for the jobs that exist as well as for future jobs and careers designed to meet future challenges within the State and region. Our educational system is poised to prepare our students to meet these challenges. The Northwest Arctic Borough School District is the only public school district in the State with its own post-secondary training center school, the Alaska Technical Center. A new magnet school has been developed as partner to the Alaska Technical Center that is a school for high school and post-secondary students, the Star of the Northwest. The innovative educational and job training programs we have established in Northwest Arctic require funding for increasing infrastructure and operational costs. Gap funding by the Federal government can make a significant impact for the good of the Inupiat people of Northwest Arctic.

### Tribal Consultation

We appreciate the recognition of tribal governments' unique legal relationship with the United States, as expressed in the Presidential Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Executive Order 13175. We understand that the USDA has a tribal consultation policy in place, and we encourage and remind the USDA to implement it consistently.

First, I would like to thank the Alaska Office and the Office of Tribal Programs for their periodic electronic newsletters and notices. We appreciate that the staff make an effort to compile and distribute information about USDA funding, training and other opportunities.

## **Accessing USDA RD Programs in Northwest Alaska**

Below are some of the specific ways in which the opportunities provided by USDA RD have been meaningful to Maniilaq Association.

### Alaska Code Blue Project

The Alaska Code Blue Project was started in 1999 in an effort to identify, prioritize and seek funding for essential equipment for rural emergency medical services in Alaska. Funding for the Project is provided by the State of Alaska, Denali Commission, tribal health corporations, communities, local emergency medical services, and USDA RD. The contribution of USDA to this program has been key to its success. In the past, it has helped us purchase much-needed medical equipment and has been crucial to the operation of our telemedicine program, which enables us to provide health care in some of the most remote villages in the world. This year, we are applying for funds to contribute toward the purchase of a patient transportation vehicle for the Kivalina Clinic.

### Utuqqunaat Inaat Loan Guarantee

In 2012, USDA RD guaranteed a loan which comprised a portion of the total funding used to build Utuqqunaat Inaat, our 18-bed long term care center we opened in 2011. Utuqqunaat Inaat, meaning a “place for Elders” in the Inupiaq language, is one of our most treasured facilities, because it enables Elders to remain in their home region throughout the last of their days rather than having to be sent to Anchorage or further to receive the care they require.

Also of tremendous importance to our operation of Utuqqunaat Inaat was the Agricultural Act of 2014 (also known as the “Farm Bill”) Section 4033, which allows the donation to and serving of traditional food through food service programs at public facilities and non-profit facilities operated by Indian tribes and tribal organizations. Traditional foods were defined to include wild game meat, fish, seafood, marine animals and plants and berries. On September 2, 2015, Maniilaq served the first meal authorized by this Act at Utuqqunaat Inaat – musk ox soup. It was a day of celebration in Kotzebue, and USDA staff were there to celebrate and eat with us.

### Cooperative Agreement

Last fall, Maniilaq and USDA signed a Cooperative Agreement for the period of September 30, 2015 through December 31, 2016. The purpose of the Agreement is:

“to improve access to Rural Development programs to remote and isolated regions of Alaska. The Agreement will support Rural Development’s StrikeForce and community economic development efforts and enhance Native American business development by leveraging partnerships and resources of diverse institutions and organizations.”

The total amount of federal funds obligated under the Agreement is \$37,000. As a tribal nonprofit corporation providing health, social and tribal government services, we are pleased that the USDA sought

to partner with us; however, the purpose of the Agreement aligned better with the work of the Northwest Arctic Borough economic development department. Therefore, we subcontracted with the Borough to implement the Agreement. The Borough has held community meetings in 10 villages, met with the city and tribal governments, and distributed materials containing information about USDA programs in each of those villages. The Borough has made updating on USDA programs a part of its regular monthly Assembly meetings, after which Assembly members are able share the information with their constituent communities. We are grateful for the opportunity to disseminate information about the USDA's programs in our region. The challenge we face is that the federal obligation under the Agreement is capped at \$37,000. This is not enough to fund a full-time position; therefore, the function is required to be tacked onto an existing position. With limited resources, we rely heavily on the person filling that position to have the capacity to add the USDA work to their already full plate.

### Water and Sanitation Projects

We thank the Rural Alaska Village Grant Program (RAVG) for helping us to address the urgent need for adequate water and sewer systems in Northwest Alaska. Every one of the 12 villages in our region has significant water and sanitation deficiencies. Although progress has been made, some of our villages, such as Kivalina, are still without running water and sanitation systems. Water must be hauled from a community source, and residents use 5-gallon buckets (commonly referred to as "honeybuckets") to dispose of human waste.

A key to the USDA's successful outreach to meet the critical water and sanitation needs of our villages is the partnerships it has developed with and other Federal and State agencies. In our experience, the USDA's StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity has been effective in addressing some of our region's most critical water and sanitation needs, and we encourage the USDA to continue that program.

### **Conclusion**

Challenges to the health and economic well-being of Northwest Alaska remain. However, we are optimistic that with commitment, collaboration and hard work we will implement positive change and enable our region to thrive. Thank you for your consideration of our views.