

Association of Village Council Presidents News

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Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) Department of Interior & National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Tribal Consultation October 5, 2022

Testimony of Vivian Korthuis:

My name is Vivian Korthuis, and I am the Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP). I am Yup'ik and a member of the Emmonak Tribe. Thank you to all the staff who organized this consultation and traveled to Alaska to hold these important consultations in person and in our region. I want to extend a special thank you to Secretary Haaland and Assistant Secretary Newland for responding to AVCP's requests to hold this consultation and making it possible for this to happen.

Association of Village Council Presidents

AVCP is the largest tribal consortium in the Nation, with 56 federally recognized tribes as members. Right now, we're all gathered in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Western Alaska. There are 48 villages spread along the Yukon River, Kuskokwim River, and Bering Sea Coast. This also makes us an Arctic region. The YK-Delta has approximately 27,000 residents, who are primarily Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Athabascan. Subsistence is our Way of Life. 70% of households in our region harvest game, and 98% harvest fish. Salmon is the main fish our families rely on to feed us throughout the winter.

Salmon Crash

Alaska Tribes are experiencing layers of disasters. On top of a long-running law enforcement emergency, tribes are still dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental threats such as last month's Typhoon Merbok. These disasters are compounded by Western Alaska's unprecedented salmon crash. For the last three years, Chinook salmon runs have been at their lowest in more than three decades. On top of health and safety concerns, our families are worried about putting away enough fish to feed their children throughout the winter. Parents and grandparents are worried about passing our Way of Life down to their children and grandchildren.

Recommendations

We need solutions, not more delays or temporary measures, to preserve these resources and protect the food security of our families and tribal communities. I'm sharing three recommendations briefly with you today.

Recommendation Number One: Reduce Bycatch and Interception of Salmon Bound for AYK Systems in federal-managed fisheries

We cannot continue to wait for agency researchers to conduct run reconstructions and complete bycatch impact analyses before the National Marine Fisheries Service takes action to reduce the thousands of salmon taken as bycatch each season. Subsistence fishers rely on fishing the most to feed our families. Our use has the least amount of impact on declining stocks. It is deeply unfair to place the harshest restrictions on subsistence users in the name of conservation. This isn't right. Every action at your disposal should be taken immediately to reduce bycatch.

Recommendation Number Two: A Comprehensive National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) evaluation of the impacts of our current fishery management system

The National Marine Fisheries Service and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council continue to rely on the 2004 NEPA Comprehensive Evaluation to make management decisions. There have been significant changes in the environment since the 2004 evaluation:

- Dramatic declines in salmon populations, marine mammals, and sea birds;
- The impact of climate change on the ecosystem – sea ice loss, the northward movement of fish species, and unusual deaths of ice seals and gray whales to name just a few; and
- The impacts of these declines of salmon and other resources on our ability to continue our subsistence Way of Life and provide food for our families.

A new comprehensive NEPA evaluation is necessary to update the information used to make decisions about fisheries management now.

Recommendation Number Three: Stronger Partnership with Tribes

Tribes have managed these resources successfully for generations. Including tribes at every level of the decision-making process will result in better outcomes – not just for tribes, but for all who depend on these resources. A few recommendations for how to strengthen the partnership with Tribes include:

- Respect the trust relationship and engage with Tribes on a government-to-government basis. Hold tribal consultations on all decisions and policies that will impact Tribes. Remember that the Council process is not a substitute for tribal consultation.
- Incorporate Indigenous Knowledge in decision making and research processes. There is a wealth of knowledge passed down by our Elders to today's subsistence fishers – over thousands of years – that can be shared with agencies as we look for solutions to the current salmon crash.
- Increase Tribal representation in the Council process, including Tribal representation on all Council committees.

Conclusion

Again, I want to thank you for travelling to our region to hear directly from our Tribes. Last month AVCP held its annual convention. I asked tribal delegates to share how the salmon crash has impacted their communities. I gave them plastic bags to write these messages on – bags that would usually hold salmon strips or dried salmon, but now are empty.

Here is one of the messages:

“The salmon crash has touched all of us in our region. We are a salmon people. Please help us keep our Way of Life. Don’t ignore our plea for help. We matter just like you.”

Quyana.

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For additional information, please contact AVCP Communications Director, Gage Hoffman at 907-543-7308 or email at ghoffman@avcp.org

AVCP is a regional nonprofit tribal consortium comprised of the 56 federally recognized tribes of the YK Delta. The geographic boundaries of AVCP extend from the Yukon River Village of Russian Mission downstream to the Bering Sea coast, north up through Kotlik and south along the coastline to Platinum and then extending up the Kuskokwim River to Stony River, including Lime Village on the Stony River tributary. The area encompasses approximately 6.5 million acres, or 55,000 square miles, in Western Alaska.