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Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – National Marine Fisheries Service Tribal Consultation February 3, 2023

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. Our tribal members are suffering from an unprecedented salmon crash and our tribes are demanding immediate action from all federal agencies involved in fisheries management, including the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

The Association of Village Council Presidents

AVCP is the largest tribal consortium in the Nation, with 56 federally recognized tribes as members. We are 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 year's Typhoon Merbok. These disasters are compounded by Western and Interior Alaska's unprecedented salmon crash. For the last three years, Chinook salmon runs have been at their lowest in more than three decades. Subsistence fishing is severely restricted, while bycatch continues. 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. We need all involved to work together, in good faith, using Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge and accurate information, to find solutions, both immediate and long-term, to this crisis.

Groundfish Harvest Specifications

One area that can help or hurt this situation are the proposed harvest specifications. The proposed specifications will allow more pollock fishing, which will result in more bycatch. The programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Groundfish Fisheries Management Plans and the Harvest Specifications EIS inform this agency's decision to authorize increased trawl fishing in the Bering Sea. Both environmental analyses are outdated. They do not consider the rapidly changing ecosystem and the salmon crash affecting multiple species in our Western Alaska communities.

Important decisions, such as the harvest specifications, should not be made based on an outdated analysis. Your decisions should be based on updated information that takes into account the current state of the ecosystem and analyzes how fisheries interact with the ecosystem and intensify declines in salmon.

In addition to an updated Programmatic EIS – a process that will take some time – NMFS must take immediate action to address the problems our families are facing and have been facing for the last three years. Your agency must take a precautionary approach and set Total Allowable Catch (TAC) at a level that will allow enough salmon to reach our rivers to meet escapement goals and rebuild stocks.

Each fish matters to our families and communities. Your management decisions should reflect that. This includes the harvest specifications decision and a new programmatic supplemental EIS that assesses specific management measures to ensure the subsistence needs of our communities are met.

Government-to-Government Relationship

I also want to remind you that including tribes at every level of your decision-making process will result in the best outcomes. We have managed these resources successfully for millennia, and our contributions are vital to reversing the current crash.

Tribal consultation should be held on all decisions and policies that will impact Tribes. The North Pacific Fisheries Management Council process is not a substitute for tribal consultation. And, to the extent the Council process is used, there must be tribal representation on all Council committees.

Conclusion

Every week – sometimes several times a week – I get a call from an elder, tribal leader, or grandparent asking me not to forget about the families in our region who are suffering through this crash. And also to ask what will be done about it. That is why we are here – our tribes and tribal communities are demanding action. The burden of conservation should not fall on us alone.

I look forward to a plan of action following this consultation, including the identification of the precautionary management measures NMFS will implement as you move forward with updating the programmatic EIS. And also, assurances that NMFS' management decisions will not have a detrimental impact on Western and Interior Alaska tribal communities.

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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.