

ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS

Thaddeus Tikiun Jr., Chairperson | Vivian Korthuis, CEO | AVCP.org



Administration

101 A Main St., PO Box 219, Bethel, AK 99559 | T 907.543.7300 | F 907.543.3596

Alaska Day 2023

Challenges at the Northernmost Border: A Focus on Getting the Right Priorities Resourced *Critical Infrastructure, Communications, Technology, Climate Change, and Energy*

Panel: Critical Alaska Native Concerns on Economic Security, Energy Security and Food Security

**Vivian Korthuis, Chief Executive Officer
Association of Village Council Presidents**

March 1, 2023

Good morning. My name is Vivian Korthuis, and I serve as the Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP). AVCP is the regional non-profit tribal consortium serving 56 federally recognized Tribes located in 48 villages along the Yukon River, Kuskokwim River and Bering Sea Coast in Western Alaska. We live in the Arctic. Our region has approximately 30,000 people who are primarily Yup'ik, Cup'ik or Athabascan.

I would like to thank the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) for inviting me to be part of this panel for AFN Alaska Day 2023. Today, I'm going to focus my comments on the Challenges at the Northernmost Border and try to describe "What Success Looks Like" at the end of my comments.

This morning, Representative Mary Peltola spoke of how important it is to acknowledge the power of the human mind. Her comments reflect Yup'ik teachings and what the late Dr. Paul John used to tell us all the time: "move forward with one mind." "Moving with one mind" means that we have a clear vision or picture of ourselves as people and where we are going on our path forward.

This is a powerful tool because what it means is that people are united. To move as one people is not an easy thing to do. That sense of urgency around Arctic issues is clear as we have heard from this morning's presenters, especially from our Congressional Delegation and military officials.

Our people live in villages that are anywhere from 50 plus to over 2,000 people. In our region, Bethel is approximately 7,000 people. We know that from the time we wake up in the morning to the time we go to sleep at night, we all have the same concerns. We want to make sure our children are able to go to school in the morning, we have jobs to make a living, we are able to drink clean water and wash clothes in our own homes, we have food to eat and we live in communities that are safe. These same issues are issues that all Alaskans and all Americans share.

Senator Murkowski, Senator Sullivan, and Representative Peltola touched this morning on all the critical issues for rural Alaska. Senator Murkowski said this morning that "Bethel is not Baltimore." Her comment was on point. I want to thank Representative Peltola for bringing up the topic of the Salmon Crash and the

Nunaput umyuallgutkut pinirluteng-Ilu, Tegganerput qigcikliki pirpakluki-Ilu, ayagyuaput-Ilu ciuliqagcimaui yuuyarakun.

Our Tribes are united and strong, our Elders are respected and valued, and our youth are guided by Yuuyaraq.

Akiachak, Akiak, Alakanuk, Andreafski, Aniak, Atnautluak, Bethel, Bill Moore's Sl., Chefomak, Chevak, Chuathbaluk, Chuloonawick, Crooked Creek, Eek, Emmonak, Georgetown, Goodnews Bay, Hamilton, Hooper Bay, Lower Kalskag, Upper Kalskag, Kasigluk, Kipnuk, Kongiganak, Kodik, Kwethluk, Kwigillingok, Lime Village, Marshall, Mekoryuk, Mtn. Village, Napaimute, Napakiak, Napaskiak, Newtok, Nighthute, Nunakauyak, Nunam Iqua, Nunapitchuk, Ohogamiut, Oscarville, Paimiut, Pilot Station, Pitka's Point, Platinum, Quinhagak, Red Devil, Russian Mission, Scammon Bay, Sleetmute, St. Mary's, Stony River, Tuluksak, Tuntutuliak, Tununak, Umkumiut

recent State of Alaska Board of Fisheries meetings last week in Anchorage. To say that Food Security, specifically in rural Alaska, has been a hot topic is an understatement. The people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta are facing a true crisis – the lack of salmon in our rivers is having devastating effects on the Tribes. The people of Alaska, especially the Tribes, are being severely impacted by overfishing, bycatch, and salmon intercept in Area M by commercial fishermen.

There were 295 people at the Board of Fisheries meeting who signed up to testify, and I was one of them. About 1/3 of the people who testified were from the AYK Region. Their testimonies reflected all of the tears, hurt, and food insecurity that we see now in our region. There are approximately 10 more weeks till the ice breaks up on the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River. People should be getting ready for fish camps. The stories people told were heartbreaking. It was exhausting and unbelievable for me to witness the process where the testimonies, stories, and requests of our people fell on deaf ears. The one thing that clearly came out of last week's events at the Board of Fisheries Meeting is the sense of Unity and commitment to working towards revitalizing the salmon stocks in the Yukon River and Kuskokwim River and the protection of Subsistence and our Way of Life.

Food security means having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious, food. For the last three years, I have received almost daily phone calls and emails from elders, grandmothers, parents, and tribal leaders all telling me that people are not secure. They don't have enough fish to feed their families. Their freezers are empty.

This crisis is years in the making. For over a decade, tribal communities in the AYK have shouldered the burden of conservation to meet escapement goals, honor treaty obligations, and allow the commercial fishing industry to continue to profit. On the Kuskokwim River, Chum salmon has dramatically declined since 2020 with three years of unmet escapement goals and subsistence harvest needs. On the Yukon River, there are three years of unmet Chinook, summer chum, and fall chum salmon escapement – meaning unmet treaty obligations with Canada and unmet subsistence needs. Families on the Yukon have been unable to fish for salmon for two years.

In my opinion, we are experiencing a humanitarian crisis and famine (famine is the extreme scarcity of food) in the AYK Region. This is just one of the layers of challenges, that include the recent Typhoon, the Pandemic, and the continuing state of emergency with Public Safety. My hope is that we take the opportunity and figure out how to protect the salmon, our rivers, our oceans, and especially our Way of Life.

I have three recommendations on how we can do this:

Number One: Partner with Tribes on a Government-to-Government Basis. The Federal Government has a government-to-government relationship with Tribes, which includes a trust responsibility to tribal governments. This trust responsibility includes protecting our Subsistence Way of Life.

The Northern Bering Sea Intergovernmental Tribal Advisory Council is an excellent example of partnering with Tribes on a government-to-government basis. The Tribal Advisory Council was established by the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area Executive Order (signed by President Obama in 2016 and reinstated on President Biden's first day in office). The Executive Order sets aside 112,300 square miles, from the Kuskokwim Bay to the southern border of the Chukchi Sea as the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area.

It also creates a special governance structure by establishing the Federal Bering Task Force and the Tribal Advisory Council to create a space for the Tribes in the Bering Sea to co-manage the Northern Bering Sea alongside Federal decision-making agencies. These two bodies are just beginning the process of working together. This is the approach we need to find solutions.

Number Two: Make Management Decisions Based on Quality Information. Tribes and Tribal Organizations in Western Alaska are urging the National Marine Fisheries Service and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to stop using outdated environmental analyses from 2004 and 2015 to make management decisions impacting our waters and resources. A new environmental analysis and evaluation that considers the drastic species declines and salmon crashes in recent years need to begin immediately.

When conducting this new analysis, Tribes, Tribal Organizations, and tribal communities must be included in the process. We should be the first people you talk to. We know what is happening in our backyards, front yards, and rivers.

Management decisions must also include Indigenous Knowledge. Our Tribes bring a wealth of knowledge about the Arctic – our experience with the ocean, rivers, ice, fish, lands, and wildlife dates back generations. Combining our traditional knowledge with Indigenous-led science and research will lead to a true understanding of the Arctic and the food security crisis we are facing. True understanding will lead to meaningful solutions.

Number Three: Everyone Must Do Their Part. Alaska Tribal communities – with the highest cost of living in the Nation – are the most regulated and restricted subsistence fishers in the Nation. We are the only ones being forced to sacrifice to conserve the salmon. This isn't right or fair and needs to stop. With salmon in jeopardy and subsistence users being unable to fish, refusing to do anything to reduce bycatch and intercepted salmon is irresponsible and unacceptable. The fishing industry needs guardrails put in place to reduce the impact of their actions, and that needs to happen now.

Forty years ago, as an undergraduate student, I stood along the Connecticut River where I learned that there were no salmon that ran up that river for at least 200 years. I could not wrap my head around that idea. Now, like many of you, we find the same situation on the Yukon River where for the past three years there are no salmon returning to the river. How can this be? Is the United States going to let this happen? Is Alaska going to let this happen? Are we going to let this happen? Or are we going to get to the place where we agree to move forward with one mind to protect our salmon and our Way of Life? Will the Yukon River ever have salmon running back up the river? As, my recommendations show, I know that the path forward to address this issue will require all of us.

In closing, I'd like to thank Melanie Bahnke who did an excellent job identifying the many issues we all face and encouraging us to go beyond tribal consultation to become "action" oriented. She challenged all of us to "do something about what we care about." I also want to thank the Bush Caucus for participating in Alaska Day.

Last week, at the Alaska Board of Fisheries meeting, the State of Alaska Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources kept on asking, "What does success look like?" when the Board talked about the different propositions. During a break, I approached him and said that I'd like to answer his question. I said, success to me looks like the Yukon River salmon going back up to the headwaters to spawn, smokehouses are full, and freezers are full of fish, at a minimum. That goal should be what we are all working towards this with one mind.

Thank you.