

February 2, 2017

Dear North Slope Borough residents-

Too often, it seems, the Iñupiat voice receives little consideration when it comes to critical decisions and policy initiatives which affect the Arctic Slope. In recent years, with the changing Arctic and the challenges and opportunities that come with that change, the eyes of the world have focused north – with politicians and special interest groups pushing harder than ever to establish laws which directly affect our well-being. During this time, when the voices of those who call the Arctic home should be of critical importance to lawmakers and nongovernmental organizations, we continue to take a back seat to the wishes of government agencies and well-funded conservation groups.

In 2015, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat was established with the purpose of providing local advocacy and engagement from the Iñupiat people to state, federal and international forums addressing Arctic issues. The formation of VOICE provides an organization designed to reflect the concerns of our members who are growing weary of outside entities speaking on our behalf without our consent. As stewards of our land, water and resources for thousands of years, the Iñupiat should be more fully integrated into any decisions which affect our region, our subsistence way of life, and the economic stability of our North Slope communities.

During our first full calendar year since formation, VOICE has undertaken dozens of efforts to protect the interests of Arctic Slope Iñupiat. While many of these issues remain and there's considerable work to be done, we would like to highlight several of the advocacy issues we've engaged in and that we will continue to work towards in the new year.

#### U.S. - RUSSIA BILATERAL POLAR BEAR TREATY

As most of you know, a treaty between representatives of the U.S. and Russia was signed in 2000 due to the perceived need for government intervention in the management of Arctic polar bear populations. Shortly after the treaty was implemented, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) placed a taking limit on the subsistence harvest of Chukchi and northern Bering Sea polar bears, a decision that has affected our subsistence rights ever since.

Last year, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, along with the North Slope Borough Wildlife Department, reached out to U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan regarding the treaty's impact on our people's ability to practice a traditional lifestyle. We expressed disappointment that, with minimal localized input and a simple stroke of a pen, the taking limit has been renewed every year since its inception.

VOICE members traveled to Washington D.C., where we met with the USFWS, the State Department and Senator Sullivan. The result of these meetings was the first-ever Polar Bear Summit held last June in Nome – convened by the USFWS – to listen to additional concerns from the Alaska Native community.

Our members firmly disagree with the commission's belief that the USFWS is more equipped to manage the polar bear resource than the Iñupiat. Instead, we support efforts to have the USFWS enter into a cooperative co-management agreement with a newly formed Alaska Native organization; an arrangement that would encourage local involvement and allow stakeholders to drive co-management policy moving forward.

As an organization, we will remain vigilant and continue to work with the Alaska delegation, the commission, the North Slope Borough and the USFWS to ensure no additional restrictions are imposed that further degrade our subsistence rights. We will also continue to engage affected communities to allow for maximum local input when shaping any regulation or policy initiatives impacting our way of life.

#### NATIONAL PETROLEUM RESERVE - ALASKA

Just as subsistence is key to our continued way of life, so is resource development vital to our economy. The oil and gas industry fuels our corporations, creates jobs and business opportunities, funds our schools and brings modern-day amenities to our communities. The Arctic Iñupiat readily acknowledge the benefits of responsible resource development and the role it plays in the success of our region.

However, increasingly burdensome mitigation requirements imposed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A) could have a substantial impact on future Arctic development; and hence the future economic prosperity of the Arctic Slope region.

The agency's Regional Mitigation Strategy (RMS) is meant to be a stakeholder-driven process, where consultation with Natives helps to ensure best industry practices and identify measures to offset potential subsistence impacts. However, this has hardly been the case. Instead, our members feel the process of developing the RMS is being forced upon us with little regard for useful collaboration. VOICE agrees with the premise of the RMS, but we are concerned that the BLM is imposing policies without first allowing an opportunity for Native people to fully-engage in the process or for meaningful feedback to be fully-incorporated into the draft strategy.

Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat has taken every opportunity to provide written recommendations to the BLM during each public comment period, and hopes to become a more meaningful partner to the agency in 2017 to collaborate in the best interest of North Slope Borough residents.

#### IVORY BAN

Alaska Natives have always relied on our local resources to sustain our communities. This includes the walrus we hunt for subsistence and its ivory used for tools, arts and crafts as permitted under the Marine Mammals Protection Act. This past year, however, earnest efforts to protect the African elephant have led to proposed legislation banning the domestic sale or trade of ivory. Those efforts have also led to unintended consequences for Alaska Natives.

While the ban does not include ivory from walrus, mammoth or mastodon sourced by Alaska Natives, the absence of any such acknowledgement in proposed legislation has significantly damaged the ability of our many artisans to sell or trade their artwork – creating unnecessary economic and cultural hardships.

Consequently, VOICE is leading an effort of collaboration between the Iñupiat people, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, the Eskimo Walrus Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and lawmakers to clarify any ban proposals in the best interest of the Alaska Native population.

Our membership believes that a ban that's not fully informed about the traditional and economic necessity of legally obtained ivory by indigenous peoples is culturally insensitive and detrimental. As such, the traditional and cultural use of the resource should be respected by lawmakers when considering future legislative efforts.

The Iñupiat people have every right to pursue economic, social and cultural self-determination. The laws of the U.S. should support indigenous populations, not interfere with these basic rights. With domestic ivory bans gaining momentum and ban policies already in place in states such as New York, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii, VOICE will continue to work towards mandating that any future legislation clearly and deliberately exclude walrus, mammoth and mastodon ivory in order to protect our culture and economy.

#### OUR VOICE. OUR VISION.

It's been a busy year, and Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat has worked hard to represent our members and become meaningful contributors to policy issues affecting our region.

We have fought vigorously to ensure our voices are no longer marginalized and that outside entities do not speak for us; we've supported economic opportunities that provide jobs, infrastructure and investment in the region; fought for our subsistence rights and the sustainability of the Iñupiat culture; taken on climate change issues and associated policy initiatives; educated Washington lawmakers and state legislators about the need for subsistence and responsible development to coexist in the Arctic; and much more.

Despite an unstable economy, continued job losses and significant adverse actions by government that stand to negatively affect our region, VOICE enters 2017 with tremendous cause for optimism. As we usher in a new president and his administration, and state lawmakers convene in Juneau for the 30th legislative session, we have the opportunity to realize the bright future we envision for the North Slope. We have the ability to be involved, stand our ground and speak as one on issues important to our communities. We will forever be remembered for the work we undertake today and the positive impact our efforts have on future generations.

Taikuu,



Sayers Tuzroyluk, Sr.  
President

