

# Bering Sea Elders Group

## Spring/Summer 2025 Newsletter

### JOINT STATEMENT OF APPRECIATION ISSUED FOR BERING SEA PROTECTIONS



**Vivian Korthuis**  
CEO, AVCP

*In 2016, President Barak Obama created the Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area and closed most of the northern portion to oil and gas drilling. Nine years later in 2025, President Joe Biden used his authority to permanently withdraw the remaining areas in the Northern Bering Sea from oil and gas leasing. In response, the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), the Bering Sea Elders Group (BSEG), and*

*Kawerak issued the following joint statement:*

As Alaska Native Tribal Organizations that serve and advocate for over 70 Tribes and collaborate with communities in Western Alaska and the Bering Sea, we offer our deepest appreciation and gratitude to President Biden for protecting our waters from offshore oil and gas leasing.

The Northern Bering Sea area has been home to our ancestors for thousands of years, and it will be home to our descendants for thousands of years to come. In this remote and threatened part of the world, we strive to live in balance with each other, our environment, and the fish, birds, and marine mammals that sustain us. Climate change and growing industrial activities threaten our traditional lands and waters and the resources we have stewarded for generations.

President Biden's action responds to our longstanding request. Tribes in our region have opposed offshore oil and gas activities since commercial leasing was first proposed in the early 1980s. For decades we have sought permanent protections from leasing, and we are grateful that President Biden has fulfilled our request.

We hope that this action puts to rest any controversy about oil and gas operations in our waters and we look forward to working with our Tribes, state and federal government agencies, and others to advance inclusive and sustainable management in our region.

"We thank President Biden for issuing these withdraws and honoring over 40 years of Tribal advocacy to protect our food security and marine environment from oil and gas leasing. Kawerak region Tribes have opposed offshore oil and gas drilling in the Northern Bering Sea since the early 1980s. Tribes are the original stewards of the Northern Bering Sea. We depend on a healthy ocean, and we appreciate President Biden for partnering in this stewardship to protect our waters," said Mary David, Executive Vice President, Kawerak, Inc.

"Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) would like to express our sincere gratitude to President Biden's commitment to protecting our food security and marine environment by limiting oil and gas leasing in vulnerable areas. AVCP has opposed offshore oil and gas drilling in the Northern Bering Sea since the early 1980s," said Vivian Korthuis, AVCP Chief Executive Officer. "President Biden's decision reflects a strong dedication to safeguarding natural resources that are vital to both our economy and ecosystems. His leadership in prioritizing sustainable practices ensures a healthier resilient future for us all. We thank President Biden for his efforts in fostering a balanced approach to energy development and environmental conservation."

"The Bering Sea Elders Group extends our sincere gratitude to President Biden and his commitment to protecting the Northern Bering Sea. Our traditional waters of the Bering Sea are interconnected, and protecting these waters helps ensure our food sovereignty, our cultural, economic, physical and traditional existence, and our very survival," said Jaylene Wheeler, BSEG Executive Director. "BSEG has long opposed offshore oil and gas drilling in the region. We have stewarded these waters for generations and intend to do so for generations to come. We thank President Biden for his leadership and partnership in protecting these waters and our collective future."



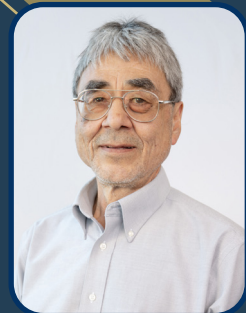
**Mary David**  
Executive Vice President, Kawerak

### MESSAGE FROM THE BSEG CHAIR

Every moment of every day, we give thanks for all that we have in the strength of family, community, and Tribes. As we adapt to rapid changes in our subsistence lifestyle, I wish each Tribe of the Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim (AYK) watersheds success in harvesting our traditional foods.

Many of us continue to experience the physical, cultural, and spiritual loss of salmon, a mainstay of our subsistence wheel. The void of salmon in our lifestyle looks only to grow as the U.S. Federal Government places a priority on the harvest of the billion dollar pollock fishery, while throwing our salmon overboard and the Alaska Department

*(Continues on page 2)*



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*(Chair's Message continued from page 1)*

of Fish and Game (ADF&G) still implements Alaska's Mixed Stock Policy allowing the Alaska Area M commercial fishermen to fish on stocks that do not migrate up their anadromous fish streams and rivers. AYK Tribes cannot put king salmon and chum salmon on our plates like we had done for millennial, while the commercial harvest continues with the blessings of our own state and federal governments. Our AYK commercial fishermen are not able to make a viable living anymore with the depletion of our stocks, so our equipment goes without repair and maintenance leaving many on the beach. Our spirit, stomach, salmon, and Bering Sea ecosystem hurts!

The ADF&G and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) must collect and share with stakeholders like us data about the state of our waters and environment that is actually useful. If we do not curtail wasteful overfishing, we may not have salmon on our tables for generations to come. Like the moratorium placed on our Yukon River Tribes, without them at the table, and the ADF&G, BSEG passed a resolution asking for the State of Alaska "to suspend the Area M salmon fishery or abolish the mixed-stock policy in Area M" and stating that nothing should be off the table in reviving fisheries in federal waters, "including a moratorium on factory trawling for a period of time sufficient for our salmon to recover." The burden of conservation must be shared by all governments, international, national, state, and local!

Add to our dilemma, climate change with increasing storms with increased magnitude, Alexandrium algae bloom, increased

marine vessel traffic in the Bering Sea, ocean acidification, micro-plastics, Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear waste currents, global insecurity, pollution, changing migratory patterns, and population problems of our subsistence resources. With ten brothers and two sisters, my dad had to be an excellent fisherman and hunter/gatherer to feed our huge family. Without many employment opportunities in our villages, taking salmon off of the table will force us to adapt trying to replace the rich omega 3 fatty oils with other resources that do not provide us with the same nutrients our body and spirit needs.

Our Bering Sea ecosystem, of which I am a part, has been brought to its knees. Once the richest sea in the world, our bountiful Bering Sea is on the verge of a serious and unprecedented collapse.

With our state and federal governments, it has been all take and nothing given back! Time to give back! Leave some for our future generations please. "Take only what you need, leave the rest. Waste nothing that gives themselves to you to sustain life." The Chinook salmon, Alaska's state fish, is quickly leaving the plates of a growing amount of Alaskans.

In conclusion, I would like to recognize the work to preserve our salmon and culture of the late Richard Slats of Chevak, who stated he had my back! His quiet wise demeanor will be missed.

If you would like more information about BSEG or any of the topics discussed in this newsletter, please visit the BSEG website at <https://beringsealders.org>.

## BSEG ANNOUNCES RECIPIENTS OF 2ND ANNUAL YOUNG PROVIDER & CULTURE BEARER AWARDS



Charlie Korthuis

The Bering Sea Elders Group is pleased to announce the recipients of BSEG's second annual Young Provider and Young Culture Bearer Awards. Established in 2024, these awards recognize two young people under the age of 25 who perpetuate their Alaska Native culture and contribute to the health and well-being of their community.

"The Bering Sea Elders Group is proud that there are so many young people today who live and strive to exemplify their Native culture and values," said BSEG Chairman Jerry Ivanoff. "We are proud to honor these two amazing role models who represent our region."

Charlee Korthuis, an enrolled member of the Emmonak Tribal Council, is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and minor in Alaska Native Studies at the University of Alaska Anchorage where she is also a University Success Student in the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program. Charlee actively participates in several Indigenous activities and has completed internships with the Bristol Bay Native Association Fisheries Program, Senator Lisa Murkowski in Washington, D.C., and with the National Parks Service's Alaska Native Tribal Relations Program.



Alexis Rexford

Additionally, Charlee has participated in General Assemblies of the Inuit Circumpolar Council.

Alexis Rexford is an enrolled member of the Native Village of Gambell. She is an undergraduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Rural Development with concentrations in Human and Social Development and Entrepreneurship.

Alexis identifies as a student of western education as well as a lifelong learner of Inuit knowledge systems of Inuit Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Alexis is passionate about the strengthening of indigenous sovereignty through the protection of lands, waterways and animal kin. Also, she strives to step into her role as a young person with awareness and responsibility of serving the communities that have raised her.

To be considered for an award, recipients had to be nominated by a family or community member, board member, or their school's teacher or administrator. They are also required to be affiliated with one of BSEG's Member Tribes or reside in a Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area NBSCRA community.



# AVCP CALLS FOR MEANINGFUL CHANGE TO END SALMON CRISIS



The Association of Village Council Presidents Subsistence Committee and AVCP leadership testified at the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) meeting to bring attention to the dire salmon crash which is creating a humanitarian crisis for thousands of Alaska Natives.

AVCP Chief Executive Office, Vivian Korthuis urged the Council to enact new fishery management rules to end the five-year salmon drought, “We are asking that you take transformative action to help our communities. Our

rivers and ecosystem are changing. Why isn’t our management regarding chum salmon bycatch also changing? Every salmon counts and we need to work towards making sure our salmon get to their spawning grounds.”

The NPFMC is currently considering five chum catch alternatives. AVCP recommends NPFMC consider an alternative which sets a hard cap on bycatch at a level as low as possible while also calling for the creation of conservation corridors to allow salmon to safely pass to spawning areas.

AVCP Executive Board Chair Thaddeus Tikiun told the Council, “We need to get an alternative which sets hard limits and protects the fish corridors. Anything other than that tells me no real effort is being made.”

AVCP Traditional Chief Nels Alexie joined Korthuis and Tikiun at the hearing in Anchorage. “The reason why I came here is because of my traditional stomach. Will you give me back my chum and my king salmon,” says Alexie.

In March, the trio met with the council in Bethel for a Regional Advisory Council meeting to hear first-hand from people in the region who are suffering.

“Where there should be a focus on the consequences of environmental and social impact, we see the focus on financial benefits as a priority over our way of life. This is why we are here today,” says Korthuis.

AVCP Subsistence Committee members Julia Dorris, Christina Changsak, Martin Andrew, and William Igkurak addressed the Council as well. Each told their unique stories of how the salmon crash is impacting their families, friends, and neighbors. “Fish bonds our families, helps us communicate with one another. It is part of the cultural and spiritual aspects of our lives,” says Andrew.

The NPFMC will decide next steps following the hearing. It is possible the Council may set new standards of fishery management by the end of this year.

## ICC HOLDS FOCUS GROUP WITH INUIT FROM ACROSS INUIT NUNAAT



The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) successfully convened a three-day Indigenous Knowledge Focus Group, bringing together Indigenous Knowledge holders and ICC staff from Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. The focus group provided a space to reflect on progress and opportunities for meaningful engagement of Inuit in

Arctic research and decision-making and set a clear direction to further advance Indigenous Knowledge in ICC’s work and beyond. Knowledge holders also engaged in critical discussions on related issues, including Indigenous data sovereignty and data management.

Under the theme “Advancing Indigenous Knowledge from Theory to Practice,” Indigenous Knowledge holders emphasized that research needs to be done in partnership with Inuit – not studies conducted on us. Knowledge holders stressed the need for ICC to establish a strong presence at major international science conferences and symposiums to educate the research community. They also called for researchers to “come to our table” and stressed the need for Inuit to organize and host our own Indigenous Knowledge Symposium.



The focus group strengthened Inuit unity and reaffirmed our commitment to collectively work toward implementing true co-production of knowledge. Knowledge holders emphasized that Indigenous Knowledge must not only be recognized but actively applied throughout all phases of the research process.

Sara Olsvig, ICC Chair, who addressed the focus group virtually, said “Indigenous Knowledge is inseparable from the right of self-determination. Knowledge production has played a big role in mapping resources, lands, and waters. For many centuries, much of this Knowledge flowed south, out of Inuit homelands, and into the hands of others. Indigenous Knowledge is thus also about our sovereignty. A full recognition of Indigenous Knowledge in its own right is critical to the further development of Arctic research and knowledge production. The focus group will bring us necessary steps closer to a tangible application of the Circumpolar Inuit Protocols for Equitable and Ethical Engagement and provide tools to implement our call for full compliance with the rights of Indigenous Peoples in any knowledge production.”

# POWERFUL TESTIMONY SHARED BY KAWERAK TRIBAL MEMBERS

Salmon is a vital part of the food security, culture, and wellbeing in the Kawerak region. Salmon stocks continue to decline, and subsistence harvests of chum continue to be restricted, yet the commercial offshore pollock trawl is not subject to a limit on bycatch of chum salmon. Because of this, Kawerak advocated for the Council to take urgent action to reduce chum bycatch in the pollock fishery, including by looking at the combination of an overall hard cap, a conservation corridor, and industry incentive measures.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) held a special meeting in Anchorage regarding the issue of Chum salmon bycatch February 3-11, 2025. In preparation for the meeting, Kawerak offered regional tribal members

who wished to comment about the importance of chum salmon in their communities an opportunity to learn how to provide testimony at the Council.

Additionally, Kawerak developed a “how to” pre-recorded webinar on the Kawerak YouTube Channel. These resources could be utilized for individuals who wished to call in their testimony, as well as to support tribal members who wished to travel to the meeting to provide testimony.

To view the full press release, go to the Kawerak website at [www.kawerak.com](http://www.kawerak.com).

To view the video, go to [www.youtube.com/@kawerakinc5314](https://www.youtube.com/@kawerakinc5314).



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