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Stephanie Quinn-Davidson, Director
Brooke Woods, Executive Council Chair

9 March 2019

Dear Chairman Morisky and members of the Board of Fisheries,

We are writing this letter of support to strongly urge you to pass the “Alaska Board of Fisheries finding on the religious and ceremonial use of king salmon by Alaska Native peoples of the Yukon River”. We applaud the Board’s effort to take meaningful action on Mr. Stanley Pete’s original proposal. We acknowledge that Mr. Pete’s original request for a regulation change is not feasible within the current regulatory and legal framework and appreciate the Board’s consideration to take alternate action.

The Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission represents 30 federally recognized Tribes along the Yukon River. Founded on tribal unity, the Fish Commission advocates for fishery management decisions and policies that protect and honor the traditional way of life for Alaska Native peoples living along the Yukon River, utilizing traditional knowledge and western scientific data. We are committed to the conservation, protection, and restoration of Yukon River salmon for the well-being of our people and future generations.

Salmon are essential to our culture, traditions, connection to one another, spirituality, nutrition, and wellness. Alaska Native peoples often refer to salmon as their family – they are one of us. We do not see them as something to manage. They are not a resource to own. They are our one of us. This is our worldview.

King salmon are the first salmon to enter the Yukon River, marking the end of a long winter and signaling the change of seasons. The first king salmon are rich in nutrients and healthy fats and are a much needed food to replenish empty stores. Often, when the first king salmon arrived in the river, we would be at the very end of our winter food supply but knew that we would survive with those first salmon. For this and many other reasons, the first king salmon were traditionally celebrated along the river. We have dances, stories, and ceremonies celebrating their return.

Alaska Native peoples have had to adapt to a regulatory framework that did not incorporate their local knowledge, traditional practices, or worldview. The unintended consequences of this framework have resulted in a loss of cultural traditions passed down and significant hardships, as they have become criminalized with fishing closures or gear restrictions. Alaska Native peoples have always been conservation-minded – never taking more than they need – and were the original stewards of the resource for millennia. However, the regulatory framework treats Alaska Native peoples as “stakeholders” to be managed and discounts or ignores the intimate relationship Alaska Native peoples have with the salmon. Yes, low salmon populations have necessitated conservative regulatory actions by fishery managers; but those actions still failed to take in to account the many important religious and ceremonial practices, like those mentioned by Mr. Pete. Loss of access to their traditional foods, a decline in fish camps, and a subsequent criminalization of a way of life have led to a significant decline in well-being for Alaska Native peoples.



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By adopting this finding, the Board would be joining a growing list of entities making reparations for western management and regulatory systems that have had unintended consequences for Alaska Native peoples. This finding would be an historic step toward much needed healing and reconciliation.

Thank you for your consideration on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Brooke Woods
Executive Council Chair

Dr. Stephanie Quinn-Davidson, Ph.D.
Director

