

February 5, 2016

RC 104

Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska

Nikita Robinson, Climate Change Planning Coordinator

Tom Robinson, President

Chris Price, Environmental Coordinator

RE: Alaska Board of Fisheries Proposal 194, by UNFA

Dear all,

This letter is to provide current subsistence and community information from a recent subsistence project in Unalaska to inform decision making on Proposal 194 before the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Data presented here are from the ongoing research project created by myself, an Idaho State University associate professor and Aleutian anthropologist, responding to a Request for Proposals from the Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program, funded by the

USF&WS's Office of Subsistence Management, recommended by the Kodiak-Aleutians

Regional Advisory Council, and approved by the Federal Subsistence Board entitled Aleutian Islands Salmon and Other Subsistence Harvests (#12-420). The study also includes the island communities of Nikolski, Atka, and Adak. As you all know, this study is in the analysis and writing phases. These data are as yet unpublished and should be considered preliminary. The final report will be available to the public this year in 2016.

Proposal 194 submitted by the Unalaska Native Fishermen's Association to the Alaska Board of Fisheries proposes to close the waters of Unalaska Bay to commercial trawling for groundfish from June 10 to November 1. Currently the State opens a parallel fishery on September 1 to Eastern Bering Sea pollock catcher vessels and there is no set quota for the area.

The proposal addresses trawling impacts since 2002 on the smaller commercial fishermen, subsistence, and sport users of the bay. The proposal references several hardships to the community resulting from a decline in local fisheries access such as displacement of the small commercial fleet, subsistence harvesters having to travel farther out of the bay to find food, displacement of wild fish and game, safety concerns, gear conflicts, commercial closures, habitat destruction, and overall poor subsistence fishing and hunting returns.

The proposal also identifies local concerns about a lack of information on the area or the ecological impacts of trawl activity.

There has been very little systematic subsistence and land use work in Unalaska. The ADF&G Subsistence Division has conducted several subsistence surveys in Aleutian villages over the years, however, the last time Unalaska was surveyed for all species used was in 1995 for 1994 harvest data. Figure 1 shows Unalaska and four other communities for comparison for representative years based upon ADF&G's subsistence surveys. These studies provide harvesting quantities, methods and locations for salmon, halibut, sea mammals, and other species in each village, but lack a comprehensive appreciation of individual, local, and regional dynamics.

The Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian region have a long history with foreign commercial enterprise: the Russians pursued sea otters and fur seals; Americans pursued fur seals, salmon and crab; and Scandinavians chased cod, herring and whales. My previous research in the eastern Aleutian region has shown that local indigenous peoples participated in the development of these industries alongside codfish saltery and salmon cannery companies, and the current connection to commercial fisheries is an extension of historical processes (K. Reedy-Maschner 2010, Aleut

Identities: Tradition and Modernity in an Indigenous Fishery, McGill-Queen's Univ. Press). Unalaska has a similar history. Today in Unalaska, however, the local economy of fishermen is dominated by transients and non-indigenous peoples, and indigenous Aleut/Unangan involvement represents a fraction of the industry. The community nonetheless has a clear and strong relationship to the waters and resources of the Bering Sea.

Unalaska is a distinct community in the Aleutians for its scale (it is more populated than all the other villages combined), its composition (indigenous Unangan/Aleut residents are 7% of the total community), its fame (Deadliest Catch, top fishing port), its limitations (short runway, very little land available for building and development), and its opportunities (the hub of Bering Sea).

For this current project, Unalaska was surveyed over two trips in 2014, resulting in comprehensive subsistence and economic data from 2013 for 45 households (Figure 2). The survey targeted a cross-section of Unalaska residents, from indigenous Aleut/Unangan to nonindigenous community members attracted to the area by fishing, processing work, teaching, marriage, and a number of other reasons. These data are preliminary and should not be construed as the final numbers, but provide a strong sense of the relative frequency of harvest by species category for these mixed households. Figure 3 shows Unalaska's harvests in pounds usable weight as compared to the other study communities' harvests. Figure 4 shows the reported harvests from the 45 Unalaska surveys relative to one another by species category.

Salmon dominate the quantity of pounds usable weight harvested. Halibut are the primary nonsalmon fish harvested and used. Every household uses berries, even though the pounds usable weight is not high. It is a food that is accessible to most everyone and highly desired. When talking about the island's plant life, one man said, "It's the thing we treasure most."

It is difficult to capture "trends" with two data points from two different studies two decades apart. The differences in harvest quantities from Figures 1 and 3 between years and communities are largely a function of community size and surveyed portions of the population. Per capita harvests are not necessarily comparable between studies either; however, Figure 8 considers the change in per capita harvests between these two studies and two decades. The problem with per capita data, which looks at household composition and harvests per household, is that many hunters and fishermen are harvesting for other households as well, particularly elders.

Overall, basic harvest numbers are misleading because they do not capture the problems or give context. Interviews documented a range of declines and concerns. Proposal #194 specifies problems with subsistence salmon, halibut, herring, and crab fisheries. Our interviews from 2014 describe the same and other concerns.

Salmon. Many households described concerns in harvesting coho. There are no coho found in Summers Bay and Morris Cove, locations that are most accessible to the community for fishing. This was attributed by local people to both the trawlers in the bay and to the removal of habitat when dealing with salvaging a ship that wrecked nearby. There is interest in starting a federally funded enhancement project to rebuild salmon habitat for subsistence use in both Summers Bay and Morris Cove. People must travel farther and farther to find runs of sockeye and coho. Only 13 of the 45 surveyed households harvested coho during the study year.

Several people reported that the sockeye population is low. One community leader said, "People say it's because of the pollock trawling in the bay. This is true. Every fish that that trawler trawls up is one less fish for Grandma S_____ to catch. Even one fish trawled up is too many for her" because she can't go out of the bay. "The elders set their nets and try but they can't catch anything." One elder said, "When you're brought up on subsistence, it's hard to get by when they take it away."

Halibut. Halibut bycatch in the trawl fishery and direct take by sport fishermen were key concerns for Unalaska's subsistence fishermen. Halibut are a key resource but are declining and difficult to find in

the bay. The map provided for harvest locations does not show quantities taken from the bay; halibut harvests inside the bay were few during the study year and the majority was taken in Akutan Pass. Only 18 of the 45 households surveyed harvested halibut, and the most of these only took a few fish for the year. There is a local program for seniors ages 55 and over in which frozen halibut bycatch from Bering Sea fisheries is stored at processing plants and donated to individuals, but this is no substitution for harvesting themselves.

Food Safety. Unalaska residents report the biggest fears of their own environment of any study community in the Aleutians. They describe flounders with sores on their undersides, salmon that are the wrong color, clams that smell like oil when you crack the shells, seals with pustules on their skin, and shrinking halibut, among many. Environmental concerns weigh on people when they are deciding what part of their island is safe to eat from. "Do I go to Safeway or go clam digging?" asked one woman. Every household surveyed reported that they will not eat shellfish from the beaches inside Unalaska Bay. The bulk of the shellfish in the summary table above are Tanner and King Crab. This category also includes octopus, the third most frequent invertebrate used. Only one household reported harvesting clams for the survey year and these were harvested outside Unalaska Bay. Households reported that clams and mussels are polluted from the processors and the outfall lines, leaving the beaches and its shellfish oily, acidic, "smells like diesel," and unfit for consumption. Residents know they must go outside the bay to get healthy foods.

Food Security. Several people in Unalaska mentioned having to buy salmon and halibut fillets from the local stores. It was a "sad story" and both fish were "really expensive" at the store. One young woman said if her uncle, who is the sole subsistence provider to her single mom, herself, and her brother, cannot get fish because he is working or simple unable, then they have to buy it.

One Unalaska elder said, "The less you eat of local foods, the more you eat out of the grocery store and the more you have to work and your life changes. You spend less time outside and more time worrying about money." The number of people harvesting from skiffs in the bay has declined.

"Hamburger Aleut" was a term used by locals to describe their lack of a varied Native diet. Reasons were the lack of foods legal to harvest, foods hard to find, costs of harvesting farther from the community, and foods that are contaminated and unfit for consumption. One man stated that, "Society has turned us into Hamburger Aleuts" because of industrial pollution ruining their wild foods. Beef is purchased in bulk "from the Mainland" and shipped out to the island at high costs but is less desired than wild foods. One local women's shelter operates as a "sometimes food bank." The director stated that there was a significant amount of food insecurity in Unalaska. It is a hidden issue for many people, but those individuals making minimum wage are clearly unable to adequately stock their pantries.

Sharing is an essential practice in the community to ensure that households that are unable to harvest receive the foods they need. Several of the main hunters and fishermen give away the bulk of their halibut, salmon, and seals, for example, to elders first, and then others in need. Most who are able to hunt and fish are intimately aware of the needs in the community and there is added pressure to take care of many households.

I hope that this information is useful to the Qawalangin Tribe given the short notice with which I had to prepare it and the preliminary nature of the information. It is my hope that both the Tribe and the USF&WS will be able to use my final report when released in 2016 to address current subsistence uses for the community of Unalaska.

Please contact me with any questions at any time.

Thank you,