Mercedes Knighten RC 12/1/21

Good day directors. I am Mercedes Knighten, maiden name Bell from the Upper Copper River area. My grandparents are from Chitina and across the Copper River where my great grandfather was chief. Our people have harvested salmon on the Copper River for time immemorial. I have been fishing, harvesting and eating fish all of my life. My clan is the Udzisyu clan which is the caribou clan.

Salmon when I was younger was our main source of food. It was used to feed our families and for dog food. Now we buy dog food. I was put into fish camp at a young age and spent every summer there until I turned 18. I had to participate because there were so many fish to put away. I continue to have a place on the river so that I can keep passing down my knowledge to my 6 year old son and other family members.

My fishwheel sight was passed down to me from my grandmother. Because I am the oldest female grandchild. Being a female heir to my family comes with a great responsibility. I will also have to pass this fishwheel sight onto another family member once I am no longer able to manage it on my own. Managing a fishwheel is a family and community business. my immediate family alone are 40 people. I manage the fishwheel to provide the much needed nutrients and the emotional cultural necessity. Salmon isn't just a food source for our people it is a life source. We treat the first salmon that come up the river like a king. We let those fish keep going so that we can harvest more fish for the years to come. our people do not use the first run of Salmon we let that go by. We have traditional stories that help us understand how important taking good care of the first king fish that comes through is.

The Ahtna people have been the foremost experts on the management of the Fish in the Upper Copper and have used best practices. Because we were concerned with the spawning and the return of the fish for example in 2021 my village which is the second set of fishwheels on the river did not put our fishwheels in until the middle to the end of June. Other families took the sacrifice and put no wheel in. This year the salmon finally made it all the way up to the Chistochina area. We wanted those fish to make it all the way to our families in the further most parts of the river. Which in the past years they have not gone that far. My family also practices using a wet box and we watch our wheel and put the kings and jack kings back in the river if they are caught. These small things are how we have managed to keep the fish coming back year after year. We have a cultural practice of only taking what we need and the burden of conservation seems to fall on us instead of others. The escapement goals need to be met not lowered.

My village is working an area for 10 more fishwheels from our village. I was surprised to hear F&G staff saying that there are less wheels being used. I have seen an increase of wheels in our village. My dad and I used to share one and now we both have one and my cousin put one in down river from us was also new. The cost of lumber has been a inhibitor at his time.

I recommend the BOF adopt proposals 9,10,11, and or 13 that addresses the issue of dipnetting from boats. There is an increase in the method by subsistence users above the bridge in chitina. This method of dipnetting is very disruptive to the fishwheel users. Boats are coming way to close to our fishwheels and disrupting our fishwheel set up. This means as they buzz by they are so close they knock our fishwheels off kilter and it has to be fixed so that it can continue to catch fish. I also believe people need to be stationary to dipnet. I know that fish will hold up inside water holes that make it easier to harvest too many. A boat can sit on top of a hole sometimes with a fish finder and sit there and dip the salmon that are trying to rest to make it the rest of the way up the river. We were actually told by a guide that he needs the fish finder so he doesn't waste his time. a traditional subsistence user knows no time, all the time it takes is all the time it takes.