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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It's an honor to be part of this conference, which is obviously designed to welcome people with all kinds of environmental perspectives.

I wasn't sure how my comments would fit in with the other topics on your agenda....until I looked at your agenda. You've got workshops on everything from computer recycling and stormwater treatment to traditional village diets and understanding federal jargon. So I'm not worried about fitting in somewhere. Instead, I'm worried that anything I talk about will have been covered already in three different workshops this morning.

I really do appreciate this effort to bring together so many diverse points of view. When you mix scientists and policymakers and agency staff and subsistence users and activists all in the same room, you either get a chemical explosion or a valuable exchange of ideas.

None of us would be here unless we had faith in the value of sharing ideas. It's easy to forget that no matter where we stand, we all have a common concern for the health of our world. And we can all learn from people who have a different angle on this common concern.

Today I'd like to tell you about the environmental concerns and practices of the Inupiat people who live on the North Slope, and whose traditions depend on environmental protection. I want to give you a North Slope Native view of our region's environmental status, and I want to describe the situation we find ourselves in after 30 years of successful oil development in our neighborhood.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that traditional subsistence hunting and fishing and whaling activities are at the heart of our culture. Without subsistence, we don't thrive as Inupiat. It's as simple as that. Without healthy habitat and healthy wildlife, we're in trouble.

We may live in villages, but what we consider our neighborhood goes way beyond the village. Barrow is where I park my snowmachines and make a living so I can afford to outfit my whaling crew. It's where my family stays warm during the long, dark winter, where our kids go to school, and where we sometimes get brave and try a Mexican or Korean or Japanese restaurant meal....and they're pretty good!

But our neighborhood is all that land and water beyond the village, where the caribou roam and the birds nest and the whales migrate. So we care deeply what happens out on the tundra and in the ocean.

For the past 30 years, what's been happening there is oil exploration and development. After Prudhoe Bay was discovered, our leaders realized they were at a crossroads. They knew that oil production would cause a lot of

changes in the Arctic. It would introduce environmental risk on a scale that we hadn't seen before. It would also create social impacts, but they didn't know exactly what those impacts would be or how much our lives would be affected.

Our leaders at that time could either try to keep all development out — which meant locking horns with the feds, the state and the industry — or they could work to minimize impacts and to represent local concerns through the municipal powers that came with the founding of the North Slope Borough in 1972.

Our leaders understood the importance of oil to the state and the nation. They also began to see what a regional government with taxing authority could do for the quality of life in our villages. For the first time, they could dream of having the facilities and basic services that urban Alaskans take for granted— running water, roads, decent schools, emergency services.

We haven't always seen eye-to-eye with the industry or the state and federal governments, but after 30 years of coexistence with oil, our people believe in the possibility of environmentally safe development. They believe that the risks are worth the high-quality education and village health services and relatively strong economy we wouldn't have without oil.

There have been plenty of environmental impacts on the North Slope over the years. A report issued by the National Research Council last March documented for government policy makers many of the impacts we already knew about. You can't have oil development without impacts. But most of

these impacts have been pretty well contained in remote areas — away from the people and most of the wildlife. While many mistakes were made in the early years of North Slope production, the industry has gradually developed the ability to extract the oil with care and respect.

At the same time, our local government has had a meaningful role in protecting the environment through our North Slope Borough planning and zoning powers and through our coastal management program.

The permitting process has given us tools for identifying threats to subsistence activities, important habitat areas, and wildlife species. For the most part, we've been able to join the industry and other agencies at the table early with our concerns and resolve them cooperatively.

Responding to development plans is only a small and recent expression of Eskimo environmentalism. Stewardship of the environment is built into our culture, because for centuries we were almost entirely dependent on wildlife for food and clothing. The original Inupiat environmentalism had its roots in a spiritual connection to the animals our ancestors hunted. It was based on respect for the spirits of the animals and a belief that animals and people had a personal connection — an animal gave itself to a hunter so the hunter's family could survive.

Because of this profound connection, our hunters observed the animals very closely and developed an environmental knowledge that passed from generation to generation.

Our concerns over habitat and wildlife populations grow out of that rich tradition. But nowadays, stewardship is more complicated. It's about western science and management and politics. We have fully engaged in all of these, because we see how they can help to protect our homeland.

That's why we have funded quite a bit of our own scientific research. Our bowhead whale studies have been so comprehensive and long-term that the bowhead is now among the best understood whales on earth.

We pioneered the bowhead census program, including airborne, ice-based, and underwater acoustical surveys. We have a bowhead toxicology program, so we can keep track of any contaminants that show up in our most important subsistence food source.

Over the past nine years, we have also sampled tissues in many other subsistence species for information on contaminants. Our hunters want to know if their food sources are safe, and so far the news is good.

As with so many of our research projects, the scientific knowledge that has come from tissue-sampling could not have been accomplished without the cooperation of our subsistence hunters. They have been crucial to the collection of accurate data, and I thank them for their participation.

If you want to know more about some of these studies, there's a workshop on contaminants this afternoon. Dr. Todd O'Hara is one of the presenters — he's with the University in Fairbanks now, but he did his work on

contaminants while he was on our payroll....I thought I'd mention that just in case he forgets to.

The North Slope Borough's Department of Wildlife Management has conducted studies on beluga whales, waterfowl, caribou and fish, often in cooperation with state or federal agencies. We have also made an effort to document the subsistence harvests of our residents, as well as their traditional and contemporary environmental knowledge. The result is that over the years, we've made substantial contributions to the science of northern species.

In addition to the borough's wildlife studies and land use management, our people have the nation's first and most successful program of subsistence co-management through the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. The AEWEC and the Borough have worked together to ensure the future of our subsistence whaling through a local management structure that oversees the bowhead harvest, and through scientific and political participation at the International Whaling Commission. The AEWEC has successfully represented all Alaskan whaling crews for more than two decades. It has been the model for other self-management programs targeting other resources across Alaska, and has been studied by indigenous user groups around the world. There is no finer example of responsible self-determination in the world of resource management.

My wife happens to be the Executive Director of the AEWEC, and I'd like to introduce her at this time — Maggie Ahmaogak.

We have a long record of environmental activism, and our animal populations on the North Slope are generally healthy. That must mean the Eskimos don't have a care in the world, right?

Wrong! I wish I could just stop my presentation right here and walk out and live happily ever after. But I've got to tell you that I think we've got our biggest challenges ahead of us. I'm more nervous than ever about the future. It's almost like we're about to be a victim of our own good fortune and success.

Let me tell you why I'm so nervous. Oil development on the North Slope is entering a new phase. Over the years, it has gradually expanded westward from Prudhoe Bay to Kuparuk and as far west as the Alpine development at the Colville River. All of a sudden, the people in Nuiqsut can see the gas flares at the Alpine unit. Industrial activity is starting to surround them. They're feeling like they're fenced in by pipelines. The noise is driving caribou farther away, so it's more difficult and more dangerous for Nuiqsut hunters to get to their subsistence resources.

West of the Colville, a big chunk of NPR-A was opened for leasing in 1998. Leases were offered there again in 2002, and now the Bureau of Land Management is thinking of opening areas that were previously closed because of their environmental value.

At the same time, planning for the proposed Alpine satellite project is moving ahead. This will be the first development in NPRA. From the looks of things, it won't be the last.

The problem with oil development is that you have to go where the oil is. There are estimates of 3 billion barrels of recoverable oil in the northeast NPRA. Two billion of those barrels are in areas around Teshekpuk Lake that are now protected from leasing or surface development. That name — Teshekpuk Lake — may not mean anything to you. It means a lot to our people.

You see, the Teshekpuk Lake region is very different from Prudhoe Bay. It has a much greater variety of habitat. It provides critical nesting, brooding, and molting habitat for high concentrations of waterfowl species. It offers critical caribou habitat. Teshekpuk's waters and those of the rivers, lakes and streams it connects with are essential fish habitat. The area has a much higher degree of subsistence use by our people because it's a lot closer — it really is our back yard.

At the same time, the northwest area of NPRA is being reopened to leasing. The Northeast and Northwest planning areas of the NPRA together extend from the Colville River just west of the Kuparuk oilfield to the other side of Barrow. If you look at a map, you can see what's happening. Development is doing something it hasn't done before — it's threatening to surround the population areas of the North Slope and some of the best subsistence use areas. That means we have much higher potential for environmental risk and conflict with subsistence.

I can understand why the industry wants to move into NPRA. Congress has shut them out of ANWR. Since they can't get at the best oil prospect, they're looking for the next best thing. Estimates are that there may be as much recoverable oil in NPRA as there is in ANWR, but it is much more spread out and will be more expensive to develop. Still, industry has to go not only where the oil is, but also where they are allowed to go.

Unfortunately, the risks and potential impacts of industrial activity in NPRA are greater than they are in ANWR. People don't know that. All they know down south is that ANWR is a giant political football. If you live in the Lower 48 and you compare those two names, well, one of them is a "wildlife refuge" and the other is a "petroleum reserve." Which one is going to get your environmental juices flowing?

Now don't get me wrong, I don't have a problem with some development in NPRA. The oil companies have proved they can do the job well. But any decisions about which areas to open for leasing must place the highest priority on wildlife protection and subsistence use patterns.

Here's another example: the Teshekpuk Lake caribou herd is by far the smallest herd on the North Slope, but it is the most heavily used for subsistence because of its proximity to several of our communities. That should be a guiding concern in NPRA leasing plans, along with the needs of the waterfowl and the protection of important habitat.

That's where the politics comes in, and we're planning to be right in the middle of it. We are willing to work with anyone who shares our concerns to influence the federal decision makers.

If NPRA leasing makes us nervous, you can imagine how offshore leasing really drives us crazy. The ocean is where our most important subsistence activity takes place, and it's where the environmental risks are by far the greatest. Until they can prove their ability to clean up a spill in broken and challenging ice conditions that exist for much of the year, the industry should not be allowed to drill in the Beaufort or Chukchi Seas.

That's one of our reasons for supporting onshore development — the risks are not nearly as great, and it would be much easier to contain and clean up an accident. But the federal government continues to press ahead with leasing opportunities for the entire Beaufort Sea. The EIS produced last year for three Beaufort Sea sales does not come close to satisfying our concerns. In the first sale conducted in September, we got a deferral of areas around Barrow and Kaktovik only because Governor Murkowski went to bat for us and asked the feds to delete those areas. There's no guarantee that we'll get those deferrals again in the sale planned for next year, and the whaling community of Nuiqsut has never received a deferral of the areas critical to its bowhead harvest. And now, just to keep things interesting, the state is reconsidering whether to continue to include the Barrow and Kaktovik area deferrals in its own annual offshore sales.

Can you understand why I'm nervous? There is a lot of new development gearing up, and much of it could affect the Native communities far more than previous development did. We are especially concerned about the ongoing and increasing cumulative impacts of all that has gone on and all that seems likely to occur in the near future.

Industry activity isn't the only thing that's got me concerned. As a local government, we have always depended on our ability to have a say in how projects are defined. That's how we have been able to protect the habitats that are most fragile or most important for subsistence uses.

Lately, we've been feeling like our seat at the table is having one of its legs cut off. At the very least, we can hear the sound of a saw under the table, and it's making us real nervous.

I'm talking about the big changes that are being made to the state's Coastal Management Program. This program has been one of the most effective tools for significant local input early in the process of defining industrial projects. It has given coastal communities a strong voice in the development process.

I know that the Alaska Coastal Conference is taking place in conjunction with this week's forum, and I hope that people from coastal areas will pay close attention to those proceedings and their outcomes.

My big concern with a massive revision to the state's coastal management regulations is that it's a solution in search of a problem. On the North Slope, local influence in coastal management issues has given us a way to calm village concerns. That's because the local role in the decision-making process has been real and substantial.

At the same time, projects have gone ahead on time. The North Slope Borough has not delayed projects through its coastal management review powers. The program has simply given us a look at the bigger picture, and it's given us tools to solve problems early. Coastal management is simply a way for local communities to help identify and protect some very specific, vital areas, resources, and uses.

For many years, the State of Alaska has argued that the federal government should hand over management of wildlife resources to the state. After all, local managers know Alaska better than the feds do. That's the argument, and I agree with it.

I agree that the closer you get to the ground you're managing, the better you know what you're dealing with. This line of thinking should also apply when we're talking about local participation in land use decisions about coastal areas. The people in these areas know the land better than the state managers do, and they should have real influence in those decisions.

When the state undertakes a massive revision of coastal management regulations, I ask myself, "Are they doing it to give us more meaningful involvement in the process?"

Maybe I'm just not enough of an optimist. But we've been in similar situations before, and I get the feeling — to quote the great baseball philosopher Yogi Berra — “it's déjà vu all over again.”

The bottom line is that we've got to work together, and the North Slope Borough will work with the other coastal districts and the state to come up with the best possible program for local involvement in coastal management.

I was talking with one of our wildlife biologists not too long ago, and he said, “You know, Mister Mayor, when you get right down to it, the animal populations on the North Slope are doing pretty well. The most significant impacts of development are on the people, not the wildlife.”

This is often overlooked, but it's true. In fact, the National Research Council made a point of it last year in its report on the cumulative effects of oil development on the North Slope. That report called for socio-economic studies to get a better sense of the magnitude of impacts on people who live in our villages.

The NRC study echoed what I have been saying for years — the government spends millions of dollars studying impacts on wildlife, and rightly so. Now they need to put some effort into understanding how oil development impacts people, especially Native people with a traditional culture.

The benefits of oil development are clear — I don't deny that for a moment. The negative impacts are more subtle. They're also more widespread and more costly than most people realize. We know the human impacts of development are significant and long-term. So far, we've been left to deal with them on our own. They show up in our health statistics, alcohol treatment programs, emergency service needs, police responses — you name it.

We need impact assistance to tackle some of the problems directly related to oil development. We need to get a better handle on how these problems arise and how we can deal with them. And we need it now, not down the road after the situation gets out of hand.

Increased knowledge about human impacts can be applied in rural areas all over Alaska, wherever big industrial projects land on villages like a ton of bricks. We are victims of the assumption that if you allow development, then you are agreeing to the impacts, whatever they may be.

That is not good public policy, and in the long run I don't think it will benefit the people or the resource industries.

The truth is that industrial activity has a lot of byproducts. Some are good, and some are bad if they're not confronted and corrected. Some impacts are relatively small or temporary, and others are long-lasting and increase over time as more and more activity occurs. Responsible parties to development — including the feds, the state, the industry and local government — must face up to all the impacts. If we fail to do that, we all will suffer.

So there's a lot happening up north. Oil exploration is spreading over huge, new areas. We've seen it around one of our communities for years, and we're starting to see it in our other subsistence neighborhoods. Offshore activity is a growing threat to our whaling culture, especially if our concerns are not being incorporated in the project plans.

At the same time, we feel as though we are losing some of our clout in the decision-making process.

It's a very complicated situation, because we consider ourselves some of the most consistent supporters of responsible oil and gas activity. We know that energy production is a national and global concern, and fate has put one of the world's largest energy supplies under our traditional hunting areas.

We recognize the primary importance of the oil economy to the state and to all Alaskan communities. Alaskans need jobs, the State needs revenues, and villages from Metlakatla to Minto need a share of the wealth to keep their communities alive.

So we're playing ball. We're engaging at all levels for the future of our children and the future of your children. It's the only way we know how to do it — working together for the betterment of the whole community, the whole village of Alaska, the place we all call home. We can do our best to

stick together, or we can fall apart. I believe in sticking together, and I'm hoping you came to this conference because you do too.

Quyanakpak.