

TESTIMONY
of
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CHAIRMAN, ARCTIC WATERWAYS SAFETY COMMITTEE
before the
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS ATMOSPHERE, FISHERIES, AND COAST GUARD
Russell Senate Office Building, Room 253
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9:30 am

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TESTIMONY

Good morning, my name is Willie Goodwin. I'm from Kotzebue, Alaska, and serve as the Chairman of the Arctic Waterways Safety Committee.

Thank you for giving me a few minutes to speak with you. I am here today to talk about the marine traffic we are seeing in our northern Alaskan coastal waters, the concerns this traffic is creating, the solutions we are developing, and the engagement we need from our federal government to continue the work to create a safe environment for the arctic maritime.

The Arctic Marine Environment Is Changing Rapidly. Our coastal communities in northern Alaska depend very heavily on the ocean for our food resources. In some of our communities, 90 percent of the food supply is taken from the ocean. In our remote villages, we don't have access to grocery stores like you do here, so these resources are critical to our food security. They are the backbone of the subsistence culture of Native communities throughout Alaska. Our principal marine resources are the five main arctic marine mammals: the bowhead whale, beluga whale, walrus, ice seals, and polar bear.

Our people have relied on these marine mammals for thousands of years. They are so important to us that we created five tribally-authorized hunter groups to speak for us on issues affecting our five marine mammals. As hunters, we have managed our resource use for thousands of years, but when the Marine Mammal Protection Act was passed, we were forced to create formal organizations and get tribal recognition so that we could convince the federal government to pay attention to us and to work with us. I recently retired from my long-time position as Chairman of Alaska Beluga Whale Committee.

We also depend on our coastal waters for local transportation. We don't have a Metro system like you have here in Washington, D.C. We don't have Uber. There are no roads connecting our communities. So if we want to travel between villages, we either take a snow machine across the ice in winter or one of our small outboard skiffs along the coast in summer.

This is the way things have been for us for thousands of years, with snow machines replacing dog teams and outboards replacing canoes. But now the Arctic is different. While the rest of the globe is just beginning to wake up to the reality of climate change, we have been watching its effects transform the Arctic right before our eyes for the past 25 years. And the rate of change

increasing every year. The Bering Strait is now ice free year-round and fall 2017 was the latest freeze-up on record for the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas. On Monday it was 24 degrees in Barrow. Not too long ago, that would have been a summer temperature!

I am not here to talk with you about these climate facts, but I hope that you are holding hearings to inform yourselves.

Arctic Maritime Traffic Is Increasing. The changing climate is bringing a lot of other changes our way, including increasing marine vessel traffic. Up north, we have been working with offshore oil and gas operators since the 1980s, to address impacts of their activities on our waters, our resources, and our hunters. That has been a pretty successful collaboration so far, but now we are also faced with other vessel activity, including marine research, tourism, international transit, and fisheries entanglements.

In 2017, we were notified of 24 different research cruises planned for our waters in a three-month period. In 2016, Crystal Cruise Lines brought 1,700 people to the Arctic on the Crystal Serenity for a cruise up the coast of Alaska and through the Northwest Passage. We see smaller commercial and private cruise traffic on a regular basis. It is not unusual for vessels to anchor offshore and discharge foreign passengers into our communities. We see vessels that we can't identify hauling unknown cargo through our coastal waters.

These changes are coming faster than we can keep up with them. And they are creating very real risks for our people and for the many people now out on these very dangerous waters. One of our communities, Barrow, lost two very experienced hunters this fall, due to rough seas.

The Arctic Waterways Safety Committee Has oversight of the Waters From the Northern Bering Sea To the Canadian Border. As I'm sure you know, the U.S Coast Guard recognizes Harbor Safety Committees, comprising local marine interests in the various ports and harbors of the coastal U.S. In October 2014, a number of marine interests in northern Alaska worked with Coast Guard District 17 to stand up a Harbor Safety Committee for U.S. waters from the northern Bering Sea to Canada. Since we don't have harbors in northern Alaska, we refer to this committee as the Arctic Waterways Safety Committee, or AWSC.

The AWSC is the largest Harbor Safety Committee in the United States, by area. And it is the only Harbor Safety Committee that includes subsistence hunters. This is because, in Alaska, the greatest number of marine users are subsistence hunters, working from small skiffs to gather marine food resources for their communities.

In other areas of the country, hunting tends to be more of a recreational activity. In the Arctic, hunting sustains life. So, where we come from, when someone tells you they're a hunter, it means that's somebody who gets things done. In this case, our marine mammal hunters took the initiative, with the Coast Guard's guidance, to identify the key marine interests and bring them together.

The AWSC is a 15-member committee, including one seat for a representative from each of our five marine mammal hunter groups, as well as the North Slope Borough, the Northwest Arctic Borough, the City of Nome, the Alaska Marine Pilots Association, Marine Research (vessel

operators and research funders), Cruise Tourism, Tug and Barge Operators, Oil and Gas/Mining, Fishing, and Regional Tribal Entities.

In the short time we've been together, we have begun to work closely with the Coast Guard, NOAA, and our Alaska Delegation to Congress to advocate for bathymetric surveys through the Bering Strait and along our coastal areas. We engaged with District 17 in their work on the Port Access Route Study for the Bering Strait Region and will engage in the Chukchi Sea/Beaufort Sea PARS. We are engaged with NOAA and Coast Guard District 17, providing updates and additions to the Coast Pilot and Notice to Mariners, with seasonal notifications of subsistence hunting times and areas.

We are in the process of drafting the Waterways Safety Plan for our region of coverage. To create this Plan, we already have well-established guidelines for offshore oil and gas activities, taken from the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission's Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement with offshore operators. We also have guidelines from the NANA Region's work with Red Dog Mine. We are using the Puget Sound Waterways Safety Plan as a guide and consulting with District 17 whenever possible.

Because of the substantial amount of marine research traffic, especially federal traffic, we are seeing close to our shores, we are working very closely with NOAA, NSF, BOEM, Coast Guard, and the University of Alaska, Fairbanks to develop marine research protocols. Our goal is to promote vessel safety and to help reduce interference with our hunters.

Another initial area of focus is tug-and-barge operations. The tug-and-barge guidelines are being put together in cooperation with Crowley Maritime, one of the principal tug-and-barge operators in our region.

Continuing to Build a Safe Maritime Environment in Alaska's Arctic Will Take Investment. The AWSC has become the primary forum for arctic waterways-users to gather, exchange information, and coordinate their operations with each other and with our hunters. Our federal agencies, including Coast Guard are enthusiastic about this public forum and they are certainly making use of it. Academic researchers and commercial and industrial vessel operators express their gratitude for the opportunity to participate in this collaborative venue. Working together, we are making a difference on the water. The opportunity to meet, exchange ideas, and raise concerns is giving us the ability to increase safety for everyone using our coastal waters.

We need to keep this work going. Our success so far is small compared to the challenges we face. But it is significant. Collaboration is the Alaska way. And we are demonstrating the value of collaboration for establishing a safe and prosperous Arctic maritime. We are identifying needs and finding consensus on solutions that are effective and meaningful for all involved.

Our only choice is to keep this work going! But we don't have dedicated resources to support the work. As I said before, as hunters we get things done. We have brought in foundation funding to get this effort up and running. We are volunteering our time. We are giving this everything we have, for the sake of safety on our waters.

I hear about a lot of meetings that different groups are having across the Arctic. And I travel to some of them. A lot of people are talking about a lot of things and making a lot of plans. The

Arctic Waterways Safety Committee is the only group that is actually making a difference on the water.

The Need for Coastal Communications Infrastructure in Northern Alaska Is Urgent.

Thanks to Mr. Ed Page and his team at the Alaska Marine Exchange, we have AIS coverage for most of our waterway, which means we can track vessels through the AIS system. But we have no way of reaching them. This means that we can't warn them if they are entering waters where we have hunters or other local residents in small craft. We also can't communicate with them if they are in distress.

I cannot stress enough the risk to life caused by our lack of communications infrastructure. It leaves our local residents vulnerable to interactions with large vessels. Alaska is a big state with a lot of area for the Coast Guard to cover. The nearest Coast Guard station, which is located at Dutch Harbor is 700 miles from Nome and 1,200 miles from Pt. Barrow. That's greater than the distance from here to Omaha, Nebraska. And we're talking travel by boat. If there were an emergency in our northern waters, our local hunters might be the only responders on-sight for days.

Through 2015, we had an elaborate system of radio towers with ship-to-shore capabilities using VHF and satellite phone. Every village from St. Lawrence Island to the Canadian border had a radio tower staffed by individuals who coordinated the movements of large vessels with the activities of our small subsistence hunting boats. This system started with one radio tower at Dead Horse, put up in 1985, and grew and expanded over the course of 30 years. Oil and gas used this system. Tug-and-barge used it. Transiting vessels used it. Coast Guard used it.

Our marine mammal hunters depended on it as their lifeline to shore. The Arctic Ocean is a dangerous place at any time. Our northern areas still experience sea ice. Wind, weather, and sea-state can change without warning. We regularly experience storms with hurricane-force winds. Adding large ocean-going vessels to these waters, where we have people already risking their lives to feed their families, can be a prescription for disaster. The risk is multiplied by our lack of sound, reliable communications and traffic management.

I repeat. On any given day, we have hundreds of people on the water in small craft, working and risking their lives to feed our communities. We have unknown numbers of ocean-going vessels transiting our waters. We have no way to communicate.

We have reached out to the Coast Guard. We have reached out to the White House. We have reached out to the Committee on Marine Transportation Systems. We have looked for ways to attract private investors. We have briefed members of Congress.

The Arctic is no longer opening. It is open. Our residents are subsistence hunters. We are hard-working people who get things done. We feed our communities and look for responsible ways to share our resources. But we aren't going to get much further protecting our coastal waters, – or the resources that are vital to our survival, or our hunters and residents, or the people transiting along our coast – without resources and engagement from our federal government.

To summarize for you, here is the situation today. What we have as the Arctic opens and what we need.

This is what we have:

- We have hundreds of citizens transiting and hunting in our coastal waters in small craft.
- We have increases in the numbers of large ocean-going vessels coming through those same waters, largely unaware of our hunters' presence.
- We have a public forum, the AWSC, where local, federal, and international marine interests are working together to develop consensus measures for arctic transit and maritime safety.

This is what we need for maritime safety:

- We need a consistent Coast Guard presence in our waters.
- We need infrastructure for ship-to-shore communications with the vessels that are transiting our waters.
- We need infrastructure and other resources to support disaster response.
- We need modern ocean floor mapping for the vast majority of our waters.
- We need a way to ensure that mariners are aware of the traffic management measures so far agreed to under our Waterways Safety Plan.¹

And that is the short list.

If you remember nothing else from my testimony today. Please remember this. The Arctic is home to coastal maritime communities working on the water in small craft. The Arctic also is a frontier where thousands of people are now traveling in large vessels in poorly charted waters. Without communications infrastructure. Without traffic safety measures. Without disaster response infrastructure or even protocols. And with very limited Coast Guard coverage. Our federal government can work with us to support the approach we are taking, putting safety measures and infrastructure in place before the unthinkable happens. Or our federal government can take responsibility for addressing human disaster in one of the harshest environments on earth, without infrastructure or even communications capabilities.

I encourage you to choose the first option.

Thank you for your time.

¹ The AWSC isn't even listed on the U.S. Coast Guard's Port Directory link on its Homeport website.