

**“Assessing U.S. Preparedness and Response in the Arctic:
The Opportunities and Challenges of Increased Marine Activity”**

Hearing of the

United States Senate

Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard

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**TESTIMONY OF JACK OMELAK
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA NANUUQ COMMISSION
MEMBER, ARCTIC MARINE MAMMAL COALITION**

Good morning, Senator Begich. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

My name is Jack Omelak. I am the Executive Director of the Alaska Nanuuq Commission. The ANC is a member of the newly formed Arctic Marine Mammal Coalition, or AMMC. The members of the AMMC are the five principal marine mammal hunter groups from the Bering Straits Region north through the Beaufort Sea. Those are: the ANC, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, the Eskimo Walrus Commission, the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, and the Ice Seal Committee.

I would like to speak briefly on points of concern to our hunter groups as we observe the ever-increasing numbers of large oceangoing vessels in our coastal waters. These concerns extend, as well, to the many large vessels transiting our waters that are out of sight of our coastal communities. Our concerns about the potential adverse impacts of this increasing traffic to our subsistence resources, the ecosystem of our waters, and our longterm food security led our groups to come together. Our goal as a coalition is to speak with one voice on the need for rational management of this traffic, both domestically and internationally.

On September 20, 2012, the members of the AMMC sent a letter to the U.S. Coast Guard's 17th District, making recommendations on vessel management measures as part of the process to develop a Port Access Route Study. A copy of this letter is attached to my written testimony.

To touch briefly on the main points agreed to by the members of the AMMC and set forth in that letter:

- It will be necessary to establish Areas To Be Avoided, to protect the subsistence use areas of our coastal communities. One very important area is to the west of St. Lawrence Island.
- We need to deploy receivers and computer monitors in our villages so that residents can track vessels, using the Automated Information System.
 - The ability to monitor vessel movements and communicate with ships will be important in helping us to protect subsistence hunting opportunities.
 - The communications centers set up along the Beaufort and Chukchi Sea coasts by oil and gas operators are logical places to begin deployment of AIS monitoring equipment.
- Ship strikes on whales, especially bowhead whales, are a very serious concern to the residents of our whaling communities. For this reason, we would like to see recommendations for speed restrictions for vessels transiting the Bering and Anadyr Straits during the spring and fall migratory periods.
- To protect marine mammals during biologically important activities, we would like to see recommendations for speed restrictions and possible diversionary measures in the presence of feeding whales, walrus, seals, and polar bears. We also would like to see similar restrictions near any aggregations of these same species.
- I would like to note here that this recommendation for speed restrictions and diversionary measures is patterned after mitigation measures in the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission's Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement. The AMMC's work is focused primarily on commercial vessel traffic. But it is significant that the oil and gas operators working in the Arctic have been willing to adhere to these measures during vessel transit for many years.
- To maintain the health of our waters, we feel very strongly that commercial vessels should be required to treat the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas as zero discharge zones for ballast water and vessel waste.
- Given the lack of infrastructure and limited Coast Guard presence, providing emergency response training and equipment to our coastal communities should be part of any program aimed at emergency response in the Arctic.
- And finally, Senator, as you know all too well, funding for these initiatives will be critical to their success and to the safety and wellbeing of our residents and our subsistence resources, as well as the many humans transiting our ocean, now and in the future.

I am pleased to report that on January 30th of this year, the AMMC received a response to our letter from Admiral Ostebo of the 17th Coast Guard District. The Admiral's letter offers several very helpful recommendations for opportunities to pursue the types of management measures we have recommended. The Admiral also expressed an

interest in further collaboration with our communities and our coalition. We are grateful for this response and intend to pursue, on behalf of our subsistence hunters, both the Coast Guard's recommendations and the Admiral's offer of further collaboration.

I have attached the Admiral's letter to my comments.

Thank you, again, Senator for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. On behalf of the marine mammal hunters of our arctic coastal communities, I would like to expression our appreciation for your recognition of the fact that the issues discussed here go to the heart of our survival. And I would like to personally thank you for allowing our hunters' voice to be heard in this public forum.