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Doug Mecum
Acting Regional Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
709 W. 9th St.
Juneau, Alaska 99802

RE: Comment on the Chinook Salmon Bycatch Draft EIS

Dear Mr. Mecum:

The Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group (BSEAG) is authorized by thirty-two (32) participating tribal governments in the Yukon/Kuskokwim and Bering Straits regions to enhance traditional guidance to our villages on marine fisheries issues.

We formed in 2007 to prepare recommendations for decisions scheduled for 2011 regarding the northern bottom trawl boundary and the future Northern Bering Sea Research Plan. As the Chinook bycatch situation has become increasingly more urgent to our people, the BSEAG decided to support member Tribes in their calling for an immediate bycatch cap of 30,000 Chinook salmon in the Pollock fishery.

The Draft EIS does not adequately account for the impact of high seas salmon bycatch on the Inupiaq, Yupik or Athabascan peoples. Our people are experiencing disastrously low returns of Chinook salmon to some our rivers and we are unable to harvest enough salmon to eat. This causes a ripple effect throughout our villages. Not only is salmon an important food source, but harvesting and processing salmon is how we teach our children to respect natural resources and how to survive on the resources in the lands where we have always lived. As salmon returns to our rivers decline, fewer people go to fish camp, less fish is preserved for the winter and we cannot practice and pass on our traditions. Our Elders say the land is lonely when the people are not there. There is no dollar value to place on this but the cost is inestimable.

Our subsistence practices and, specifically, ties to salmon go beyond commercial value or the monetary replacement cost of food. The English language term "subsistence" is not in our Yupik language and does not describe the totality of our ties to salmon.

> Traditionally, Alaska Native peoples derive their food, nutrition, ethics and values of stewardship, languages, codes of conduct, stories, songs, dances, ceremonies, rites of passage, history, and sense of place and spirituality from the lands, waters, fish and wildlife they have depended on for millennia.[1]

> Many White persons imagine that subsistence is merely the act of an individual going hunting or fishing. Subsistence, in actual fact, is a complicated economic system and it demands the organized labor of practically every man, woman and child in a village. There are countless tasks, such as the maintenance of equipment (nets, snowshoes, boats, fish wheels, outboard motors, snowmobiles, etc.), preparing the outfit for major hunting and fishing expeditions, setting and checking trap lines, dressing thousands of pounds of fish, gathering berries and edible plants, tanning skins and hides, making things from them – clothing, footgear, containers, sleds, tents, kayaks – sharing harvest of meat and fish, and trading with other communities.[2]

This economic and cultural value cannot be quantitatively compared to the Pollock fishery, but the Chinook Salmon EIS must recognize it as irreplaceable.

The Draft EIS acknowledges intangible values to only a limited extent while the overall emphasis is on the costs to the Pollock fleet if a bycatch cap causes the Pollack fleet to forego some Pollock catch. The document projects high cost to the Pollock fleet but does not consider that the Pollock fleet will most likely undertake special means to avoid high bycatch areas in order to catch their quota. Therefore, the Draft EIA may over estimate the costs. In any case, foregoing a small percentage of the profit of some years is not comparable to the tangible and intangible impacts that Chinook salmon bycatch has on our time tested ways of life.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that management measures "minimize bycatch to the extent practicable." Continued high Chinook bycatch creates a situation that is intolerable for Tribes who rely on salmon for food, traditional economy and culture. A cap that allows continued high bycatch to persist is not "practicable" for people.

The International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights[3] says "In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence". We ask the National Marine Fisheries Service to establish a 30,000 Chinook bycatch cap for the Bering Sea Pollock fishery to ensure more salmon returns to our rivers. Chinook salmon that is taken as bycatch by the offshore Pollock fleet is fish that will not return to our rivers. There is no such thing as "surplus" fish that can be sacrificed for bycatch because every fish that returns to our rivers is important for meeting our subsistence needs, for supporting our small commercial salmon harvest, and for contributing to the continued migration of salmon and future generations of our people.

The Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group does not strive to bring harm to the Pollock fleet. Our villages are beneficiaries of a successful Pollock fishery. We seek solutions that first and foremost protect subsistence, the foundation of our survival for the last 10,000 years on this land we call home. The conservation and cultural importance of maintaining healthy salmon is of utmost importance.

Sincerely,
BERING SEA ELDERS ADVISORY GROUP
David Bill Sr., Chairman

Arthur J. Lake
Executive Director

C/O Native Village of Kwigillingok P.O. Box 49 Kwigillingok, AK 99622