Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group

Resolution to Protect the Northern Bering Sea

PREAMBLE:

Alaska Native peoples living on the Bering Sea coast, keen observers of the world around us, are witnessing changes in seasonal patterns, sea ice and animals. In recent years Bering Sea ice has formed later in the year and melted earlier in spring. In some years even when the ice extends far to the south, it is thin. These changes affect where different animals find food, how they survive and where they may be available to us for subsistence.

While ocean temperatures and ice conditions in the Bering Sea vary greatly year-to-year, the trend over time is expected to be warming. Overtime commercially valuable fish may occupy increasingly more northern waters, enticing large-scale fishing fleets to expand operations into new areas.

The teaching of our ancestors was based on respect for what the ocean provides. Respectful actions are rewarded by hunting success; disrespectful actions have negative consequences. We were taught never to waste what the Creator has given us, to share our food with the community and to listen to our Elders because they acquired wisdom over a long life and sharp observation. Today, while technology has changed, our traditional values and desire for a subsistence way of life remain the foundation of our culture. Respect for the natural world and caring for our resources are key to our ability to thrive off the ocean and land.

WHEREAS: The Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group is an association of Elders established to bring tribes together for the protection of our subsistence ways of life tied to the Bering Sea, and

WHEREAS: Federal fishery managers established a bottom trawl boundary to prevent these large fleets from moving into northern waters where they have not operated before, and

WHEREAS: Federal fishery managers are conducting groundfish trawl surveys and intend to undertake other research that may open the northern Bering Sea to bottom trawling in the future, and

WHEREAS: Alaska Native tribes on the Bering Sea coast are strongly concerned about the potential for future expansion of bottom trawl fisheries into the Northern Bering Sea because of the sensitivity of the whole ecosystem that supports our ways of life, and

WHEREAS: The Association of Village Council Presidents and Kawerak, regional Native non-profit organizations serving our tribes, support the vision of the Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group, to work together as one voice for the protection of subsistence and the web of life that sustains the ocean resources we rely on.

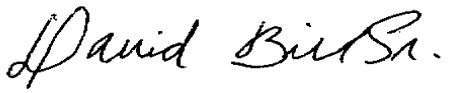
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group:

1. Urges the federal government to undertake a rigorous tribal consultation process for all decisions affecting the Northern Bering Sea.
2. Supports greater protection for tribes located on Nunivak Island, Nelson Island and Kuskokwim Bay where the existing bottom trawl boundary comes too close to the land and allows intensive bottom trawling in our subsistence use area. The Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group supports an expansion of the Northern Bering Sea Research Area between the mainland and St. Matthew Island. A revised bottom trawl boundary should extend from 50 miles offshore Cape Newenham to the point on the current boundary southwest of St. Matthew Island.
3. Recommends long-term protection for the Northern Bering Sea Research Area as a zone dedicated to subsistence use and ecosystem research that brings together western science and traditional knowledge for continued understanding of climate change, and its impact on marine life, ocean habitat, communities and cultures. This region warrants special attention because of its unique ecological and cultural characteristics:
    - The Northern Bering Sea is vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of climate change. The long-term consequences of climate change for the region are uncertain. Allowing industrial-scale fisheries into the region will add new stress to the already fragile ecosystem and the subsistence resources we depend on.
    - The habitat and food web of ice-dependent species that are listed under the Endangered Species Act, or designated as candidate species for listing, should be

protected, including the critical habitat offshore in the Bering Sea pack ice established for the spectacled eider.

- The Northern Bering Sea is already fully utilized by the tribes who have been thriving off of the ocean's bounty since time immemorial. Our local economies are based on active subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering, and small-scale fisheries that will be damaged by the potential introduction of bottom trawling.

PASSED JANUARY 28, 2011
BERING SEA ELDERS ADVISORY GROUP SUMMIT – NOME, ALASKA



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David Bill, Sr. – Chair