

OP-Ed: Presidential Executive Order made history for our region

By Paul Rookok

I was born and raised on St. Lawrence Island or *Sivuquq*. I learned how to live from my Elders and how to hunt when I was young from my father, uncles and brothers. We were never hungry because at different times of the year we had fish and clams, birds, whales, walrus and seals. Today we call that “food security,” but it is much more than food. Our whole culture that was passed down to us is tied to the ocean, the weather, the seasons and how we depend on the resources. We are part of the ocean, and it is part of us. We have been right here since time immemorial and we are not going away. Now, as an Elder, I am always thinking about leaving behind the same for our children and all future generations.

In my life, I never expected that the President of the United States would hear our message and make an Executive Order to help our people. But that’s exactly what happened on December 9. President Obama listened to our request for his help in protecting the ocean and making a better way for tribes to have a voice in decisions that will affect our people and the resources we rely on for years to come.

We are immensely grateful.

The day President Obama gave us the Executive Order was a history-making day! And this special event would never have come about without a unified voice from the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait regions. Bering Sea Elders Group, Association of Village Council Presidents, and Kawerak all stood together on behalf of the tribes in asking President Obama to consider our concerns about climate change, and some of the threats that we must guard against to help our people adapt and be successful.

The Executive Order designated the “Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area.” It is 112,000 square miles, extending from the Kuskokwim Bay to Shishmaref. It puts us at the table with federal agencies when they are making decisions about

discharges by shipping companies operating in our waters. It withdraws Norton Sound and the waters around St. Lawrence Island from future oil and gas leasing because our tribes made a clear case back in 1985 that we did not want to risk harm to the resources we rely on. The order also reinforces existing measures that protect life on the seafloor and support our local fisheries important to village economies.

Most importantly, the Executive Order sets up the Intergovernmental Tribal Advisory Council that will make Tribal consultation by federal government agencies much more successful. We will have a stronger and more effective role to play in decisions that affect our villages and areas important to all the marine life that sustains us. We have a big responsibility to make this opportunity the best that it can be and to help our young leaders step up to the challenge.

As an Elder designated by my tribe to serve on the Bering Sea Elders Group, I am happy to see that we can work together across this huge region. When the Elders meet, one of the discoveries has been to see that, no matter what part of the Bering Sea coast we come from, we have a bond. We all rely on the same resources, we hunt and preserve our foods in similar ways, and we all have indigenous knowledge that underpins our cultures and makes it possible to pass on our ways of life to the next generation. These are gifts that we share.

President Obama recognized the importance of our waters and the ancient cultural ties of tribal peoples to the ocean. We are thankful for his willingness to hear our story and we hope that Congress and future White House administrations keep the promise that was made to our people.

Paul Rookok represents the Native Village of Savoonga in the Bering Sea Elders Group, an association of Elders appointed by 39 participating tribes along the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait coast.