

Statement of Aleut International Association

Reykjavik, Iceland

May 20th, 2021

Aang Aang, Qilam iqamnaa, Good Morning Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues and Friends,

On behalf of everyone at Aleut International Association, we would like to thank Iceland for two years of leadership. We recognize the many projects and initiatives that were take up under this Chairmanship and we would like to commend the staff of the Arctic Council Secretariat, Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat and especially our Chair Einar Gunnarsson. Operating successfully through a pandemic has been a learning curve for all and we recognize the flexibility and dedication this has taken.

We would like to begin by extending our heartfelt thoughts to everyone who has been personally affected by the pandemic, loss of family members and personal health, loss of economic security and absence of time with family is something that has touched us all. In the Aleut region, COVID-19 intensified many issues in our communities - lacking infrastructure, insufficient connectivity and health concerns were some of the issues brought to the forefront. These issues were not isolated to our region and in fact have been felt in many Indigenous communities.

As we have rounded the corner of the pandemic, we were fortunate to have the Alaska Native Health Care system and the State of Alaska who did a tremendous job in getting people vaccinated. This was so very important in our smallest and most remote communities where COVID could have been devastating. In our region, this effort included small planes, boats and ATVs. It has been a true community effort from the beginning with individuals, community leaders, businesses and industries working together to protect our community members and making difficult decisions about mask mandates, quarantines, and restricted travel. Our communities are extremely dependent upon fishing, both for commercial and subsistence purposes and working together to ensure that these operated through the pandemic meant that many people were able to still make a living and feed their families.

While this has been a challenging time, we have been grateful to the Icelandic Chairmanship for giving us every opportunity to participate and meaningfully engage with the Nation States, Permanent Participants and Observers on important initiatives and projects. The high cost of connectivity in our region can be prohibitive and so even just having the option to participate on the phone played a large role in our ability to share our knowledge and perspective with our Arctic colleagues.

We were pleased to have participated in and contributed to SAO's Marine Mechanism series, the COVID-19 report, the Marine Plastics Symposium, strategic planning, and the multitude of working group and expert group meetings and to be able to further build our partnerships. We were able to obtain PSI approvals for both the Community Based Black Carbon and Public Health Assessment Project and the Solid Waste in Small Arctic Communities project. The solid waste project is a joint project of the SDWG and the ACAP working groups and we are thrilled that we will be working with so many partners across the circumpolar north.

Our Unangan culture and language is based on the environment in which we live. Healthy air, healthy water and the health of the land contribute to our people continuing to be healthy and live off the land. The knowledge that we have about the ecosystems and the management of these systems is inherent. There isn't a time in which these systems have not been managed by Indigenous people. Thus participating in conversations about the policies being implemented in our backyard, research being conducted there and contaminants that are being found there are all conversations that we will continue to engage in and contribute to. We recognize that understanding pollutants such as black carbon and also proper management of solid waste are necessary to keep Aleut communities clean and contaminate free. These two projects along with the CONAS and CLEO projects allow us to provide a holistic picture of not only the threats to our culture and environment but also the dynamic history and use of resources that we have as Aleut people. Robust dialogues about changes that are being experienced on the ground and the incorporation of knowledge and observations from our communities in policy and research will benefit all of us who live and work in the Arctic.

Again – Qagaasakung and congratulations to the Icelandic Chairmanship, we are confident that you have made the Arctic Council stronger, helped to protect the marine environment, contributed to sustainable development, focused efforts on the well-being of arctic people and advance the dialogue about climate and energy solutions. Aleut International Association looks forward to continuing work on these important initiatives with all of you as we welcome the incoming Russian Chairmanship and most of all – we look forward to traveling to Russia and meeting face to face with our Aleut family in Russia.