

NORTHWEST ARCTIC SUBSISTENCE REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting Minutes

Via teleconference
November 1-2, 2021

Call to Order, Roll Call and Quorum Establishment

The meeting was called to order Monday, November 1 at 9:01 a.m. Chair Thomas Baker and Council members Barbara Atoruk, Elmer Armstrong, Wilbur Howarth, Michael Kramer, and Enoch Shiedt were present via teleconference. Robert Shaeffer joined at the end of the first day of the meeting and participated the second day. Council member Calvin Moto II was present part of the first day of the meeting. Bryan L. Jones was not present and was excused. The Council has one vacant seat. A quorum was established with six or seven of nine seated Council members participating by phone at various times.

Attendees participating via teleconference:

- Office of Subsistence Management (OSM): Eva Patton, Katya Wessels, Lisa Grediagin, Karen Hyer, Hannah Voorhees, Thomas Plank, Robbin La Vine, Brian Ubelaker, and Pippa Kenner
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): Susan Georgette, Will Wiese, Brittany Sweeney, Christina Nelson, Jill Klein, Ray Hander, and Melissa Brown
- National Park Service (NPS): Jeanette Koelsch, Hannah Adkinson, Raime Fronstin, Marsh Fronstin, Justin Young, Joe Dallemolle, Marcy Okada, Kyle Joly, and Victoria Florey
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM): Tom Sparks, Walker Gussey, Bruce Seppi, Chris McKee
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G): Benjamin Mulligan, Mark Burch, Caroline Brown, Rick Merizon, Christie Osburn, Alex Hanson, and Carmen Daggett,
- Public: Gordon Cleveland, Noorvik; Vern Cleveland; Jacob Mannix, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers; Neil DeWitt, Anchorage Fish and Game Advisory Committee (AC) and member of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group; Tonya Ballot, Tribal Administrator, Native Village of Selawik; Percy Ballot; and Cyrus Harris
- Greg Risdahl, Forest Service Interagency Staff Committee member
- NANA: Damon Schaeffer

Review and Adopt Agenda

Motion by Ms. Atoruk, seconded by Mr. Kramer, to adopt the agenda as a guide.

The motion passed unanimously.

Review and Approve Previous Meeting Minutes

Motion by Mr. Shiedt, seconded by Ms. Atoruk to approve the winter 2021 meeting minutes as presented.

The motion passed unanimously.

Council Member and Chair Reports

Enoch Attamuk Shiedt of Kotzebue reported lots of salmonberries outside of Kotzebue. Warm water temperatures delayed salmon this year. The migration of caribou got delayed except in Noatak that was the only one community that got lucky. Spoke with many people about concerns over putting transporters up north on State lands where they're changing the migration of caribou through the Federal lands. The NPS should study the impacts transporters and outfitters have on the rural people, caribou and its migration. Noatak harvested caribou, and Kiana got a few, but late in the season. Other villages never got any. Also a lot of bears and wolves are in the region, especially right next to caribou crossings (some even come to camp fires as close as 10 feet because they are hungry) and they are also depleting the caribou. Heard reports from Noatak that caribou would go down to the Noatak River, but then turn around because of disturbance from wolves and bears.

Mike Kramer for Kotzebue reported slim salmon run this year. He heard many concerns about all the air traffic and food security due to increasing costs of fuel and food. Mr. Kramer wants to get more data from ADF&G on collared caribou movements from August 1st to October 15th to find out if caribou are waiting to migrate south until after the transporters/guides leave. Mr. Kramer said that local people leave by the cultural rule of allowing the lead caribou pass and suggested that the same rule should be applicable to transporters and guides. Mr. Kramer also requested data on how many commercial services are operating in each agency's area. Mr. Kramer said that caribou is the livelihood of people in the region, and people spending lots of money to go caribou hunting and come home with nothing because of the aircrafts hinder migrations. A polar bear came through Kotzebue this summer and last week beluga came through. There were a lot of trout and whitefish and lots of rain this summer.

Wilbur Howard of Noorvik reported no caribou coming through Noorvik this year, so people had to go all the way up to Onion Portage and the Squirrel River to hunt. He saw a lot of moose with twins this year and thinks the moose are doing okay but bears and wolves are everywhere. Mr. Howard said that there are also a lot of beaver houses in the lower Kobuk and many beavers in every river. He noticed whitefish going upriver early the past several years, and a few of fishermen are getting the nice black salmon. Thought there was a herring population boom a few years ago, but the younger ones were not getting enough nourishment and there was a disease that may have contributed to the big die-off this year.

Elmer Armstrong of Noorvik reported going out to pick blueberries but didn't get full pots, and that salmon fishing was slow, but his family caught enough for the winter. He was also able to harvest a moose this year. Caribou hunting was tough this year. He contacted Kiana and there was no caribou there either. Some Noorvik hunters went up river above Kiana and some went to Onion Portage to hunt caribou. Right before freeze up some hunters were able to get some caribou by Kiana. Mr. Armstrong saw a lot of bear and wolf tracks when he was hunting moose. He set a whitefish net this year but fishing slow.

Barbara Atoruk of Kiana reported good salmonberries and blueberries this year. Salmon were late coming in. ADF&G employee sets up a net and give what they caught to the villagers and local fishermen who set up nets as well and shared their catch. Sheefish were really fat this year when they came in, and harvests were good. The fishermen shared Sheefish with elders. There was too much rain to dry anything this summer. Further up river, hardly anyone seined because of the rain causing high water. The river went over the banks in Kobuk and Shungnak and flooded the communities. The caribou were very late this year. They just starting to cross [Kobuk River] and then ice came in the next day. The freeze-up happened fast, but people were still going to hunt caribou after freeze-up. Ms. Atoruk heard a lot of complaints from the Noatak area that there were many planes, and non-local hunters further up the Noatak River beyond the closure area. She also saw a lot of hunters coming through the Kotzebue airport, some with moose antlers, but she saw no meat boxes being shipped out. Lots of brown bears (even in Selawik area), wolves, and foxes around; one of the wolves came close to a person patrolling village at night. Also, a lynx came into the village and got a puppy; hunters had to go and kill him. Not many moose harvested in the area. Thankful for shares of caribou, moose, trout, beluga and *muktuk* received from others. The freeze up was late, but very sudden and the caribou were not quite near Shungnak until after the freeze. Hunters went up there on their snowmachines and harvested some caribou and a bear as well.

Robert Schaeffer of Kotzebue reported that he is concerned about global warming affecting the Northwest Arctic Regional more than any other region in the State. There are bird die-offs on a regular basis, and elders say that is because of the rise in water temperatures, especially around the mouth of Buckland River in Eschscholtz Bay, in Kobuk Lake, and in all the rivers. In 2014, there was a huge salmon die-off, in the millions, in Kobuk and Noatak rivers, and ADF&G did a study that indicated that the water was too hot and the oxygen levels were very low. Global warming is affecting our resources. There was a herring die-off in millions two years in a row, once in December, and in 2021 in October. The 2021 summer was one of the wettest as elders remember it; it rained for three months and rivers were extremely high all summer. The tremendous amount of water discharge came out of the Selawik, Noatak, and Kobuk rivers drainages. The salt content in the water in Kobuk Lake that is important for herring dropped, which could have been a reason for the die-off. 2018 and 2019 were record warm years with no ice on Kotzebue Sound, which affected subsistence practices. In 2018 – 2020, Mr. Schaeffer was involved in the sea ice study conducted by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Ms. Schaeffer talked about the changes that his father observed as a hunter in 1960s and 1970s, such as erosion and massive storms. A lot of carbon dioxide emission takes place at the erosion sites, and most of the Arctic tundra is melting at a rapid pace and emits methane gas. All of this is affecting our environment and resources, and it is just going to get worse. Mr. Schaeffer talked about environmental changes in the entire world. The Mr. Schaeffer reported that in 2018, the ice was only about a foot and a half thick and seals had to make liars in it, so foxes were able to hunt young seal pups on the ice in these conditions. The *ugruk* (seals) had to travel long distances to find ice to haul out on, and some seals drowned in the process. The growth of toxic algae affecting the walrus and seals. Mr. Schaeffer pointed out that we need to look at things from a global perspective and that global warming is a real thing.

Chair Thomas Baker of Kotzebue reported that a big concern in Kotzebue was the number transporters and guides bringing hunters around the region. There were at least 5 transporters and 1-2 guides active this fall season. Two transporters had at least 200 clients each for caribou drop-off hunts, so that's 400 non-local hunters going out in a very short window of time. And these hunters are promised an 85% or better success rate because they go wherever the herd is, typically far out above the Noatak. Caribou came very late this year, and when they came there was not many, although Noatak got some. People in Kotzebue went far up the Noatak River and a couple of people got lucky and harvested 2 animals. Other people from Kotzebue went to Onion Portage to hunt caribou with about the same results. Not many caribou were harvested locally by the hunters going out by plane, boat, or to their traditional camp. Thin and sparse ice made for poor hunting conditions for *ugruk* (seals), but a good number of people were successful in harvesting. Salmon came late and run was low. Some people said that Kobuk River salmon went to Kivalina and then came down and went up, so Chair Baker wondered if there are any ADF&G or USFWS studies following the patterns of salmon returns. Chair Baker exhibited concern regarding a large herring die-off occurred near Kotzebue and the herring were washing up on shore. A fair number of moose was harvested this fall and he was lucky to harvest one. A lot of predators (bears, wolves) were reported across the entire region (towards Onion Portage and in the Squirrel River drainage area).

Mr. Shiedt provided a report on behalf Noatak. There were lots of bears and wolves at Noatak River, and caribou would approach the river fairly close and with so many bears on both sides of the river, they would turn around and refuse to cross.

Mr. Armstrong said that the people of Noatak had to go near the Canyon to harvest caribou, which is quite a ways. Mr. Shiedt added that they went to the Howard's (spelling?) Camp near the mountains to get caribou.

Mr. Kramer suggested that the Council considers two special action requests. One special action request is to delaying entry of non-resident and non-local caribou hunters to October 15 to ensure passage of the lead caribou unhindered, which is TEK; then the locals will be able to harvest their animals. The data from collared caribou should show how the air traffic affects the migration routes. Mr. Kramer also suggested another special action that would limit the number of clients and animals per transporter/guide per season. He stressed that the food security (subsistence resources, caribou, and moose) is the biggest key factor to their survival because store food prices are exorbitant. Additionally, Mr. Kramer suggested that there can be a requirement for registration permits to only be available in the region similar to the RM880 moose permit.

Service Awards

Council member Enoch Attamuk Shiedt received a 20-year service award.

Public and Tribal Comments on Non-agenda Items

Jacob Mannix with Backcountry Hunter and Angler shared that his organization is concerned about the proposed Ambler Road and its effects on caribou migration and access to subsistence resources. Mr. Howarth shared that he went to a meeting in Fairbanks with Ambler Road and spoke about fish resources there and would like to request the Council receives an update of the Ambler Road project. Ms. Atoruk said that there just was a meeting on the Ambler Road and some elders from the upper Kobuk and Kiana were included and provided support to the road project. The Council requested a report on the Amber Road at its winter 2022 meeting. The Council also requested a report at their next meeting on the proposed Cape Blossom deep water port and associated road near Kotzebue, and its potential to affect spring bearded seal and beluga whale subsistence harvest. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities might be a good contact for this.

Percy Ballot from Buckland said that he is a member of the Seward Peninsula Fish and Game Advisory Committee. Mr. Ballot said that he sees a need for studies regarding bird, fish, and seals die-offs and what is affecting them. He also said that bycatch is affecting the King Salmon returns and was wondering if the Council is aware of this issue.

Old Business

805(c) Report

Ms. Patton provided summary of the 2021 805(c) report from the Federal Subsistence Board to the Council.

Annual Report Reply Process Review Briefing

Ms. Grediagin provided a briefing on the Interagency Staff Committee proposed Annual Report reply process review. The Council had no comments. This topic will come up for the Council discussion and comments during the winter 2022 meeting.

New Business

Wildlife Proposals and Closure Reviews

Regional:

WP22-45: Hare Units 18, 22, 23 - Establish season/harvest limit for Alaska hare. Mr. Plank, Wildlife Biologist with OSM, presented a summary of the analysis of WP22-45 to the Council. Mr. Merizon with the Small Game Program, ADF&G, clarified that this proposal specifically deals with a species known locally as jackrabbits or tundra hare. Motion by Mr. Kramer to **support** WP22-45, seconded by Mr. Howarth, passed on a unanimous vote. The Council notes that they have not seen the Alaska hare in the region recently. People used to teach their young children to hunt them since they were easy to catch. The Council supports maintaining the opportunity to still harvest some Alaska hare when they are available, as they are good eating and providing subsistence opportunities to help address food security is important.

WP22-50: Beaver Unit 23 - Trapping: Increase harvest limit to 'no limit'. Mr. Plank presented a summary of the analysis of WP22-50 to the Council. Motion by Ms. Atoruk to **support** WP22-50, seconded by Mr. Shiedt, passed on a unanimous vote. The Council reported that beavers are extremely abundant across the region and are continuing to expand their range way up into river tributaries. Beaver dams are negatively affecting fish, fishing access, and water quality. Additional beaver harvest opportunity supports subsistence and may help to keep the beaver population in check.

WCR22-18: Sheep Unit 23 Baird Mountains - Closed to all but federally qualified subsistence users. Mr. Plank presented a summary of the analysis for wildlife closure review WCR22-18 to the Council. Motion by Ms. Atoruk to **maintain status quo**, seconded by Mr. Shiedt, passed on a unanimous vote. The sheep population remains very low and needs to continue to be protected. The Council noted that the population has been too low even for a “to be announced winter season” for Federally qualified subsistence users. Local observations indicate a low and dwindling sheep population that is stressed by challenging winter weather conditions and predation. The Council requests ongoing monitoring of this sheep population.

WCR22-27: Muskox Unit 23 Cape Krusenstern National Monument. Mr. Plank presented a summary of the analysis for wildlife closure review WCR22-27 to the Council. Motion by Mr. Armstrong to **modify or eliminate the closure as recommended by OSM**, seconded by Mr. Kramer, passed on a unanimous vote. The Council supports modifying the muskox closure in Cape Krusenstern National Monument as recommended by OSM to in order to clarify the wording and simplify regulations for subsistence hunters in this area.

WCR22-45: Caribou Unit 23 Noatak National Preserve – closed to all but federally qualified subsistence users. Mr. Hanson with ADF&G provided a report on the Western Arctic Caribou Herd. Dr. Voorhees presented a summary of the analysis for wildlife closure review WCR22-45 to the Council. Motion by Ms. Atoruk to **maintain status quo**, seconded by Mr. Shiedt, passed on a unanimous vote. The Council recommended maintaining the targeted caribou closure in Unit 23 as the success of this closure has been time-tested now and protects the opportunity of subsistence hunters along the Noatak River and the other river drainages.

Crossover:

WP22-47: Unit 22 Caribou – Allow calf harvest. Mr. Plank presented a summary of the analysis of WP22-47 to the Council. Motion by Mr. Armstrong to support WP22-47, seconded by Mr. Kramer, failed with one vote in favor (Kramer) and five votes in **opposition**. The Council opposes allowing harvest of caribou calves because they are the future stock of the herd. The Council received feedback from local elders that calves should not be hunted in order sustain and grow the caribou herd and strongly encouraged opposition to this proposal so that calves would not be targeted.

Statewide:

WP22-01: Statewide - Define who is/is not a participant in a community harvest system and effects on harvest limits. Ms. Pippa Kenner, Anthropologist with OSM, presented a summary of the analysis of WP22-01 to the Council. Motion by Mr. Schaeffer to **support** WP22-01, seconded by Mr. Howarth, passed on a unanimous vote. Customary and traditional patterns of harvest in the region are consistent with community harvest systems in regulation. Hunters distribute their harvests to elders first and then to other households that need it most. The Council also supports the proposal so that regulations are consistent across regions.

WP22-02: Unit 6, 9, 10, 22, 23, 26 – Rescind restrictions for designated hunters in areas with community harvest systems in place. Ms. Kenner presented a summary of the analysis of WP22-02 to the Council. Motion by Ms. Atoruk to **support** WP22-02, seconded by Mr. Shiedt, passed on a unanimous vote. The Council unanimously voted to support wildlife proposal WP22-02. The proposal clarifies how these systems work and concurs with recommendations of other Councils.

2022 Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program

Ms. Karen Hyer, Fisheries Biologist with OSM, presented the Council with the 2022 Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program (FRMP) Statewide and Northern Region overviews. The Council supported all four Fisheries Resource Monitoring Proposals for Northern Alaska. The Council stated that the Sheefish work is especially important to their region because with other subsistence resources being limited, there is additional fishing pressure on Sheefish. The Council also acknowledged that they are seeing changes in salmon abundance, attribute this to the changing climate, and saw the need for more salmon studies. The other concern was Grayling and its decreasing size, so the Council sees a need for Grayling studies.

Identifying Issues for FY2021 Annual Report

The Council identified the following topics for inclusion into the FY-2021 Annual Report:

- Lack of success in harvesting caribou in Unit 23 by Federally qualified subsistence users due to changes in caribou migration patterns and the associated effects of guides/transporters and climate change on the WACH
- Need for Grayling study in the area
- Need to have the Council representative attend the Ambler Road meetings
- Need to have the Council representative on the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group
- Concerns regarding moose, beaver, and salmon population and need for studies and recent reports
- Concern over the current Council make-up and need for representation from the upper Kobuk River villages and from Selawik

Annual Report Reply Process Revision Discussion

Ms. Grediagin presented the briefing on the Interagency Staff Committee proposed annual report reply process revisions. The Council had no comments.

2022 Council application/nomination open season

Ms. Wessels with OSM informed the Council about 2022 Council application and nomination open season that closes February 28, 2022 and requested Council's members help in reaching out to the rural communities in the region and recruit new applicants. Mr. Ballot said that he will encourage younger people from Buckland to apply.

Discussion on Western Arctic Caribou Herd status, updates, and management strategies

Mr. Alex Hanson with the ADF&G in Kotzebue provided the Council with a brief summary of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd (WACH) status. Mr. Hanson also requested the public to provide better reporting of harvest for more accurate short term harvest estimates. Mr. Kyle Joly, Wildlife Biologist with Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, presented on monitoring of collared caribou movements, calving areas and recent published research papers. The Council asked detailed questions about collared caribou movements, sudden changes in migration routes, climate change and continuous use affecting feeding grounds, mortality on the calving grounds, the estimated population count of the Teshekpuk Herd, and its comingling with WACH.

WSA21-01 (deferred) Update and Guided Discussion

Dr. Voorhees, Anthropologist with OSM, gave an update on deferred Special Action Request WSA21-01 and requested feedback from the Council. The Council was asked several predefined questions. The Council said that people in the communities had to travel further, and expended more time, energy, and money to harvest caribou in recent years with minimal success. The Council spoke about the non-resident hunters not allowing the lead caribou to pass, thus altering migration routes. They also spoke of the importance of food security during the pandemic, about conflicts between local people and non-local hunters arriving at the Kotzebue airport, and about outside hunters bringing COVID-19 into the region. Two air transporters in the region had about 200 outside hunter-clients each that they were flying out. The Council felt that if the closure were to happen, conflicts would be minimal and would be able to be resolved with local and traditional knowledge. The Council made a suggestion that not allowing non-Federally qualified users to hunt north of the Noatak River and letting a certain number of caribou cross the major rivers would be a good compromise. The Council also suggested allowing out of state hunters to hunt only from Sep. 15 to Oct. 15, which would allow the lead caribou to pass and migration to proceed unhindered. The Council stressed that the air traffic is one of the main concerns regarding altering migration routes. The Council suggested that aircrafts could be required to fly through a predetermined corridor, which might also prevent disturbance of migration. Ms. Grediagin informed the Council that the updated WSA21-01 analysis will come before the Council during their winter 2022 meeting and the Council would be asked to take an action on WSA21-01 again. Dr. Voorhees also provided an update on the special action timeline and process.

Council's requests

- The Council stated on record that they would like to send a thank you letter and get well wishes to their former Council Coordinator Zachary Stevenson.
- The Council requested a report on the Ambler Road at its winter 2022 meeting and suggested an update of the Ambler Road be a standing agenda item at every meeting.
- The Council requested a report on the proposed deep-water port and associated road near Kotzebue at its winter 2022 meeting, and the road's potential to affect spring seal and whale subsistence harvest. The Alaska Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities might be a good contact for this.

Agency Reports:

- Susan Georgette with the Selawik NWR introduced new Refuge staff and provided the Refuge report. She also gave an update on the transporter permits.
- Will Wiese with the Selawik NWR reported about water temperature monitoring project and efforts to determine the cause of the herring die-off. He also talked about the assessment of the Selawik Hot Spring facilities that were flooded due to the beaver dam.
- Brittany Sweeney, Outreach Specialist with the Selawik NWR talked about Refuges outreach projects.
- Damon Shaeffer with NANA provided the Corporation report, which included info on the Trespass Program.
- Jeanette Koelsch, Acting Superintendent of Western Arctic National Parklands (WEAR), provided the WEAR report.
- Hannah Atkinson, Subsistence Coordinator and Cultural Anthropologist with WEAR, provided an update on the Cape Krusenstern and Kobuk Valley Subsistence Resource Commissions and caribou research projects, working with Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program, and Maniilaq Tribal Government Services newly hired intern Tiana Capelli.
- Raime Fronstin, Wildlife Biologist with WEAR, provided the information on the muskox harvest.
- Joe Dollemolle, District Ranger with WEAR, provided summary of resource protection activities.
- Marcy Okada, Subsistence Coordinator with the Gate of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (GAAR), provided the information on the park SRC, moose and sheep surveys, and a joint meeting of the North America Caribou Workshop and Arctic Ungulate Conference in May of 2023.
- Jeff Rasic, Chief of Resources with GAAR, provided an update on the Ambler Mining District Road.
- Tom Sparks with BLM referred to his written report provided in the meeting materials book. Member of the public, Percy Ballot, asked a question re sport hunters' drop-offs in the upper Buckland River, Selawik Area. Mr. Sparks said that Buckland has been closed for sports hunting but they issue some special recreation permits for the Squirrel River area.

- Christie Osburn, Area Biologist with ADF&G, provided staffing update, and updates on moose, bear, sheep, and beaver.
- Caroline Brown, Statewide Research Director for Subsistence Division, ADF&G, provided update on the Dolly Varden and whitefish species traditional ecological knowledge project, the Arctic Beaver Observation Network, the Bering Land Bridge Ethnographical Overview and Assessment, the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Harvest Assessments, and a Community Subsistence Harvest Assessment.
- Lisa Grediagin, OSM, provided OSM report.

Future Meeting Dates:

Winter 2022 meeting to be held February 14-15, 2022 in Kotzebue

Fall 2022 meeting to be held October 31 and November 1 in Kotzebue

Katerina Wessels, Designated Federal Officer
USFWS Office of Subsistence Management

Thomas Baker, Chair
Northwest Arctic Subsistence Regional Advisory Council

These minutes will be formally considered by the Northwest Arctic Subsistence Regional Advisory Council at its winter 2022 meeting, and any corrections or notations will be incorporated in the minutes at that meeting.

A more detailed report of this meeting, copies of the transcript, and meeting handouts are available upon request. Call Katerina Wessels at 1-800-478-1456 or 1-907-786-3885, email katerina_wessels@fws.gov.