



SERVING THE
VILLAGES OF:
BREVIG MISSION
COUNCIL
DIOMEDE
ELIM
GAMBELL
GOLOVIN
KING ISLAND
KOYUK
MARY'S IGLOO
NOME
SAVOONGA
SHAKTOOLIK
SHISHMAREF
SOLOMON
STEBBINS
ST. MICHAEL
TELLER
UNALAKLEET
WALES
WHITE MOUNTAIN

May 30, 2017

Mr. David Seris and Lt. Kody Stitz
Seventeenth Coast Guard District
PO Box 25517
Juneau, Alaska 99802-5517

**RE: Docket USCG–2014–0941; Port Access Route Study: In the Chukchi Sea,
Bering Strait and Bering Sea**

Dear Mr. Seris and Lt. Stitz,

Kawerak is the tribal consortium for the twenty tribes in the Bering Strait region. Kawerak thanks the United States Coast Guard for issuing a Port Access Route Study (PARS) of the Chukchi Sea, Bering Strait, and Bering Sea for public comment. Increasing vessel traffic has and will continue to impact indigenous communities throughout the route. The opportunity to comment on PARS is vital for our region's interests and therefore Kawerak offers comments to the US Coast Guard on our region's interests and our support for certain alternatives. Kawerak appreciates this opportunity for engagement and we look forward to being informed about how the US Coast Guard will interact with tribes in Alaska as the PARS is finalized.

The northern extent of the PARS area is our collective tribal homeland even though we may lack written title to lands and waters of the Outer Continental Shelf nonetheless it is where our people have sustained¹ themselves for several millennia. Within our indigenous legends and language the sea is the metaphorical extension of our indigenous selves and quite literally becomes the extension of land (when frozen). Geographically the PARS spans an enormous area from the Chukchi Sea to the southern Bering Sea, it is biologically rich and a globally important area for fish, birds and marine mammals. For our tribes, those waters are essential to our indigenous way of life². Residents from our region also take part in rich commercial fisheries which contributes to our mixed cash economy. As vessel traffic in this region has increased our communities and the resources of the sea have become exposed to greater risk^{3,4,5}.

¹ <http://www.kawerak.org/forms/nr/Bering%20Strait%20Voices-%20Vision%20for%20Action%20Summit%20Report.pdf>

² <http://www.kawerak.org/forms/nr/The%20incorporation%20of%20traditional%20knowledge%20into%20Alaska%20federal%20fisheries%20management.pdf>

³ <https://incidentnews.noaa.gov/incident/9491>

⁴ <https://www.fleetmon.com/maritime-news/2016/13375/tanker-champion-ebony-grounding-alaska/>

Kawerak values the important collection of vast amounts of data obtained through social science projects over several decades which help inform our decisions and has collaborated with many Non-governmental partners to better understand the impacts from increased shipping. Additionally Kawerak utilizes an in-depth board approved resource development policy to guide process and helps to make decisions during which we consider facts both pro and con before making decisions that influence development. With these as guides we are pleased to offer our recommendations.

Kawerak agrees with the US Coast Guard that a cascading cause and effect scenario of impacts is occurring as vessel traffic has increased as a result of sea ice loss. Route and mitigation measures to increase safety of vessels, and reduce risk, are essential for the Bering Strait region. The oiling of seabirds and marine mammals⁶ in 2012 was an unprecedented event that immediately impacted the entire hunting community for fear of pollution, impacts to wildlife, and impacts to marine mammals. It was later discovered after gross necropsy that oil had contaminated underlying tissues of marine mammals⁷ thereby raising serious concerns about the foods we eat. In a subsequent case in 2013 of marine seabirds being oiled no cause or source of oil could be made.⁸ There is fear across the Bering Strait region that the cumulative effects of oiling such as occurred in 2012 and 2013 will expose our indigenous people to pollution. Pollution and other concerns weigh heavy on our minds as we consider increased vessel traffic.

Kawerak references our previous submissions on PARS which may be found on our website at:

<http://www.kawerak.org/forms/nr/MP%20Kawerak%20Coment%20Letter%201-5-2015.pdf>
<http://www.kawerak.org/forms/nr/MP%20Kawerak%20Comment%20Letter%206-1-2015.PDF>

Fortunately the US Coast Guard has laid out alternatives that have taken into consideration the many viewpoints that we shared previously; that is, except our proposal to move the route further west of King Island. We still believe that there must be additional space between King Island and the route however other alternatives combined with our primary recommendation appear to mitigate some of our concerns.

Recommendation

Kawerak supports Alternative 2 of the PARS and the designation of the Areas to be Avoided (ATBAs) noted in Alternatives 4 through 7.

The US Coast Guard must strengthen its Tribal Consultation

⁶ https://dec.alaska.gov/spar/ppr/response/sum_fy13/121107301/121107301_sr_02.pdf

⁷ Gay Sheffielda, Vera Metcalfb, Raphaela Stimmelmayrc, Gina Ylitalod, Kathy Bureke, Kimberlee Beckmenf and Teri Rowlesg, First documentation of oil fouling in subsistence-harvested ringed (*Phoca hispida*) and spotted seals (*Phoca largha*) in Bering Strait - Fall 2012

⁸ http://dec.alaska.gov/spar/PPR/response/sum_fy14/131211301/131211301_sr_1.pdf

The US Coast Guard must involve a full suite of Governmental Agencies when dealing with tribes because tribes are engaged with a full suite of Governmental Agencies. The Tribes of the Bering Sea, Bering Strait, and southern Chukchi Sea formerly consult or have co-management agreements with the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. At every opportunity the US Coast Guard must by Executive Order fully engage with tribes. What the US Coast Guard says or does must take into consideration the federal consultations that take place with other agencies to help inform decision making. Tribes undertake discussions and exercise co-management with the National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service any interagency consultation must take into consideration the viewpoint of the other agencies work with our tribes or co-management commissions. We encourage the US Coast Guard to work with the National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service to address the potential conflict between vessels and marine resources. The only way for successful involvement to take place between the US Coast Guard and communities is to provide for ongoing opportunities for consultation with the Alaska Native communities.

Conclusion

Kawerak commends the Coast Guard for generating alternatives that have taken into consideration the years of dialogue and public meetings within the Bering Strait region. Western Alaska communities are ill prepared for mass oil spills or other catastrophic events.⁹ It is apparent that a flood of concern regarding this PARS notice is directed towards the potential impacts on marine animals¹⁰ yet the US Coast Guard does not have any management authority of marine mammals. It is imperative that the US Coast Guard work with indigenous marine animal hunters and NMFS and USFWS who are co-managing several marine animal species.

Kawerak supports adoption of alternative 2 i.e. designation of the proposed two-way route with no western spur and request inclusion and adoption of Areas to be Avoided as noted in alternatives 4 through 7 for the Bering Strait, King Island, St. Lawrence Island, and Nunivak Island.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact Austin Ahmasuk, Marine Advocate at the address above. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
KAWERAK, INC.



Melanie Bahnke, President

⁹ <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=USCG-2014-0941-0042>

¹⁰ <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=USCG-2014-0941-0041>