

Testimony of Mike Williams

Before the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming

For the hearing:
“Energy and Global Warming Solutions for Vulnerable Communities”
October 18, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to testify before you.

My name is Mike Williams. I am a Yupiaq, from Akiak, Alaska located on the Kuskokwim River. Currently, I am Vice-Chairman of the Akiak Native Community, a federally recognized tribe; and I also serve as Vice-Chairman of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council (AITC), which represents 229 tribes in Alaska.

In addition, I am Vice-President for the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), Alaska Region; and Board Member for National Tribal Environmental Council (NTEC).

1. Impacts on Alaska Natives and American Indians. Global warming is undermining the social identity and cultural survival of Alaska Natives and American Indians. As we watch our ice melt, our forests burn, our villages sink, our sea level rise, our temperatures increase, our oceans acidify, and our animals become diseased and dislocated, we recognize that our health and our traditional ways of life are at risk.

Our elders, in particular, are deeply concerned about what they are witnessing. In Alaska, unpredictable weather and ice conditions make travel and time-honored subsistence practices hazardous, endangering our lives.

According to the U.S. Corps of Engineers, at least three tribes must be moved in the next 10 to 15 years, Shishmaref, Kivalina and Newtok, while according to a GAO Report, over 180 communities are at risk (see Corps report and GAO report citation on Bibliography page, Exhibit 1. See also Testimony of Kivalina, Exhibit 2, and Shishmaref, Exhibit 3).

Everything is changing so quickly. Lakes are drying; new insects are appearing; permafrost is melting; berries are disappearing; storms are fiercer; animal populations are changing; our fish are rotting on drying racks; and polar bears are drowning.

Because of massive, record breaking forest fires, our youth and elders are having trouble breathing. Our ice is so much thinner, or entirely gone. And, our coastlines are eroding, washing away ancient artifacts from our ancestors as well as modern infrastructure.

Throughout the nation in Indian Country, traditional foods are declining, local landscapes are changing, rural infrastructure is being challenged, soils are drying, and lake and river levels are declining. Tribes are experiencing droughts, loss of forests, fishery problems, and increased health risks from heat strokes and from diseases that thrive in warmer temperatures.

If global warming is not addressed, the impacts on Alaska Natives and American Indians will be immense. Models, and the best scientific data and traditional knowledge, indicate that if we do not reduce greenhouse gas emissions the entire Arctic ice cap will melt, endangering the culture and subsistence needs of America's Inuit people. Furthermore, flooding, sea level rise, storm surges, and greater storms will endanger my people, the Yupiaqs, as well as tribes in Florida and elsewhere.

Hotter temperatures threaten all American Indians, but especially in the southwest and Florida, where we often do not have adequate means of escaping the heat. Increased global warming will also endanger salmon in the Pacific Northwest, which are crucial to tribes there, as well as in Alaska. Finally, on almost all tribal lands, enhanced global warming will threaten our sacred waters, essential to our physical and cultural survival.

Clearly, global warming presents one of the greatest threats to our future, and must be addressed by Congress as soon as possible.

2/3. Opportunities and Initiatives. There are many economic opportunities for Alaska Natives and American Indians in a low-carbon future, especially with respect to renewable energy. Tribes offer some of the greatest resources for helping the nation with renewable energy development, particularly wind, solar power, biomass, and geothermal power.

In Alaska, for example, we are installing wind power in very remote communities, such as Tooksook Bay, St Paul Island, and Kotzebue. Wind power has also been installed on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. Port Graham Village is assessing construction of a biomass facility using forestry waste. The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation has analyzed the viability of a commercial geothermal power plant. Also, NativeSUN Solar, which provides installation, maintenance, and technical support for photovoltaic systems, has installed hundreds of systems on the Navajo and Hopi reservations.

To achieve Indian Country's and Alaska's renewable energy potential, however, we need investment capital, infrastructure and technical capacity. Any renewable energy program must include opportunities and incentives for tribes. Also, with training, American Indian and Alaska Native youth and adults can be actively engaged in renewable energy jobs, from engineering, to manufacturing, to installation.

There are also economic opportunities associated with energy conservation. We would welcome tribal-based initiatives to better insulate our homes, to convert our lighting, and

to educate our members regarding energy efficiency practices. We want jobs that save us money and reduce our carbon footprint.

In general, we believe that a low carbon economy will provide multiple local benefits by decreasing air pollution, creating jobs, reducing energy use, and saving money.

4. Actions. In recognition of the tremendously serious impacts that global warming pose to American Indians and Alaska Natives, our most important organizations have passed urgent Resolutions outlining problems, threats and needed action by Congress. These resolutions include:

1) The Alaska Inter-Tribal Council (AITC) unanimously passed a resolution urging the United States Congress and the President to move forward on a national, mandatory program to reduce global warming pollution that prevents irreversible harm to public health, the economy and the environment. Traditional knowledge and science both strongly support urgent, meaningful action (See Exhibit 4);

2) The Alaska Federation of Natives, which not only called for a national, mandatory program, but also observed that global warming is “endangering our lives” (See Exhibit 5);

3) RuralCAP (See Exhibit 6);

4) National Congress of American Indians, which describes adverse impacts to tribes throughout the nation and calls on Congress to act (See Exhibit 7); and

5) 150 Resolutions from Alaska Native entities (tribes, Native corporations, and regional non-profits), which I will hand deliver to the Committee when I testify.

With respect to adaptation, communities like Newtok, Alaska are already taking action to move from dangerous sites to higher ground. It is important for Congress to recognize that the adaptation needs are very great. We require planning assistance, federal coordination, and significant financial resources to execute these crucial relocations and to fund other adaptation needs.

In all instances, it is important that our traditional knowledge be incorporated and respected, that we be consulted, and that our values and needs be honored. We have borne and continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the impacts of climate change.

In summary, Alaska Natives and American Indians are being seriously threatened by global warming. We implore Congress to take action now to protect current and future generations and to: document the extensive costs of global warming to tribes, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and help those communities like Shismaref that need to be moved, repaired, or otherwise assisted because of the adverse impacts of global warming. There is so much at stake.

On a personal note, as a resident of the small village of Akiak on the Kuskokwim River, I have also experienced global warming as an Iditarod Race musher. Alaska Natives have used dogs for transportation for thousands of years; it is an important part of our culture. “The Last Great Race” has changed in many ways since I first started participating in it in 1992. Because of an absence of snow in recent years, we have had to move the start on numerous occasions from more southerly Wasilla to more northerly Willow and even Fairbanks. To keep the dogs cool, since the days are too warm, we have to mush mostly by night now. And, we also mush more on land and less on the frozen rivers because of thawing.

Throughout Alaska and the nation, we are in peril from global warming. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, seven generations and beyond, Congress must take meaningful action to address this issue now.

This is our most sincere and urgent plea.