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February 11, 2021

The Honorable Michael Dunleavy
Governor of the State of Alaska
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 110001 Juneau, AK 99811

Dear Governor Dunleavy,

The statement you issued recently regarding the Emergency Declaration for Tuluksak said that your administration is working with local partners “to ensure the people of Tuluksak have constant access to drinking water and that the ice road is maintained.” Calista, an Alaska Native Regional Corporation representing over 33,000 shareholders in the Yukon Kuskokwim (YK) Delta region, and the Native Village of Napaimute, write to thank you for issuing the Declaration and to call attention to the ongoing emergency needs of our Region. We request the State deploy the National Guard to deliver fresh water supplies to Tuluksak and direct a portion of emergency funds toward maintenance of the essential and life sustaining Kuskokwim Ice Road that is maintained by Napaimute in collaboration with other Tribes and regional organizations.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region in Western Alaska is home to 56 federally recognized Tribes, nearly one-quarter of all the Tribes in Alaska. The YK Delta communities are located along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers and Bering Sea. Spread across an area the size of New York State, our communities are not connected to each other by road system and the only access to each community, and the rest of Alaska, is by ice road, frozen tundra, or airplane. The YK Delta region also has some of the highest costs of living in the nation and vehicle access to Bethel can offer significant cost savings for food, fuel, and other essential supplies, and of course, access to health care. Over 200 vaccinations were recently delivered by way of ice road when a doctor and two nurses traveled to Kwethluk over the frozen Kuskokwim River.

We receive near daily communications from community and Tribal leaders telling us how the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted their daily lives. Stores in villages are not always stocked, mail delivery is inconsistent and unreliable, and as you know, a recent fire devastated the Tuluksak community by burning down the only facility that provides fresh water to the village. In addition to the devastating fire, Tuluksak, along with many other YK communities, continues to suffer serious COVID-19 outbreaks and recently lost a respected elder to the virus.

With severe climate impacts now permeating the region, harsh winter blizzards frequently impede air travel and in such dangerous winter storm and blizzard conditions wind chill can cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes. Flying in water to Tuluksak may not always be an option with weather delays. The Ice Road can also be unsafe and difficult to navigate in certain weather conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to deploy the National Guard to deliver emergency water supplies to Tuluksak, not only due of the enormous expense of flying in pallets of water, but because Tuluksak is only one big storm away from total isolation and no access to potable water amidst a COVID-19 pandemic.

Calista Corporation, the Native Village of Napaimute, Donlin Gold, the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, and numerous other public and private organizations throughout the region and beyond, help fund the Ice Road program. The Native Village of Napaimute has long played a leading role in the establishment and maintenance of the Ice Road and works cooperatively with all the tribal transportation departments along the River. Napaimute leadership has been instrumental in maintaining the road every year, which allows families to travel to and from their communities along the frozen river.

Advocacy by Napaimute and other partners also helps fund plowing and safety marking of the winter road. The cost to carve out the first road and maintain it throughout the winter easily exceeds six figures annually. It is important to note that many State and federal agencies use the Ice Road regularly to perform governmental operations. Yet, the only maintenance funding that has been offered by the State has been by way of grant, which must be requested and secured annually.

As you know, last year the Alaska Legislature included \$50,000 in operating funds for management of the Napaimute Ice Road, similar to \$50,000 in funding that the State has long appropriated to the Northwest Arctic Borough to provide safe and efficient ice road construction between Kotzebue, Noorvik, and Kiana. Unfortunately, while the shorter Noorvik ice road funding remained intact, funding for the nearly 300-mile-long Kuskokwim Ice Road was line-item vetoed by your administration. To our rural river communities, the Kuskokwim winter Ice Road is as integral a part of the rural transportation system as the Alaska Marine Highway is to rural coastal communities, also to the many State and federal agencies that regularly use the road to carry out governmental functions. We are asking the State to provide funding parity for the rural communities of the YK Region.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 makes it clear: the duties and obligations to protect and promote the welfare of Alaska Native people as citizens belong to the State and Federal government. The Tuluksak emergency highlights just one emerging crisis in rural Alaska: dozens of villages reliant on decades-old infrastructure that is now failing. Power plants providing electricity and heat to homes are often run by old diesel generators. When old generators fail, an entire community may lose power and families can lose several weeks or months of food. In addition, dozens of rural Alaskan communities, including Tuluksak, still lack basic running water and sanitation. The State of Alaska must do more to protect the health and welfare of its rural citizens, particularly after benefitting so considerably from rural resource development resulting from ANCSA.

We are acutely aware of the fiscal challenges, particularly as our State and nation are nearly a year into this devastating pandemic. However, when it comes to supporting rural Alaska, as Calista noted in an [editorial](#) published last March, “more than 40 years and 17 billion barrels of oil after ANCSA was signed into law, it is well past time for clear and specific action by our elected officials.”

We look forward to continuing to work together and hope the Tuluksak emergency underscores the clear and critical need for your administration to support essential maintenance funding for the Kuskokwim Ice Road.

Sincerely,



Andrew Guy
President and CEO



Vice President, Native Village of Napaimute