

Senate State Affairs Committee

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 120 – Climate Change Commission

Thank you, Chair Kawasaki, Vice Chair Bjorkman, and Members of the Committee for holding this hearing. My name is Cisco Mercado, and I serve as the Policy Director with Alaska Community Action on Toxics, a public interest, science-based environmental health and justice research and advocacy organization. We want to thank Senator Gray-Jackson for sponsoring SB 120, which we strongly support because Alaska needs to prepare for the evolving weather and ensuing challenges that we face as a state.

Due to the climate crisis, we are witnessing dramatic changes in Alaska's weather and extensive damage to our communities. Alaska and the circumpolar Arctic are warming at a rate four times faster than the rest of the planet. We are witnessing the rapid decline in sea ice cover, as well as melting permafrost that is increasing damage to infrastructure and the vulnerability of communities. Rapid warming of the Arctic is forcing climate-induced community displacement and threatening food security. Alaska Native communities are being pushed out of their traditional lands, homes, and losing access to traditional foods, sacred places, and other cultural practices.

Recent weather events provided a wake-up call about the danger of not having a plan. On September 17, 2022, Typhoon Merbok hit the western coast of Alaska, affecting the communities including Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, Golovin, Newtok, Nome and others. According to a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Fairbanks, Typhoon Merbok was historic for many reasons. When Typhoon Merbok hit the coastline of Alaska with hurricane strength winds and extreme storm surges, there was little to no sea ice to act as a barrier to dampen the surges and protect against coastal flooding. The flooding and storm surges destroyed or severely damaged homes, infrastructure, property, utilities, and subsistence fish camps while eroding large sections of the coast. Typhoon Merbok and other severe storms in Alaska are stark reminders of the devastating impacts coastal storms can have on Alaskan Native communities' livelihoods, homes, and infrastructure.

Storms are not the only weather factors caused by the climate crisis. Alaska has seen and will continue to see increases in forest fires and flooding. The wildfire season is lengthening, and the intensity of the fires is worsening. We need to prepare now to prevent severe damage to communities and transportation infrastructure and protect against possible loss of life. As a state, we need to be prepared for future inevitable storms, wildfires, flooding and other weather events that seriously jeopardize the lives of Alaskans.

We are experiencing more substantial and more frequent generational storms. In 2005, I lived and worked in New Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina devastated our community. Hurricane Katrina caused the death of 1,392 individuals and the damages were estimated at \$125 billion. In the days following the initial landing of Hurricane Katrina, we witnessed a failure of planning from all levels of government. Due to the lack of a plan, many people were forced to evacuate or died in the aftermath.

New Orleans is a major U.S. city with access to multiple roads and highways, a major airport, and a bus & train system. Despite all these amenities, this still did not prevent the destructive aftermath and loss of life due to the lack of planning by government officials. In Alaska, we have many rural communities that are not accessible by road and whose landing strips are gravel. They will have little or no access to hospitals or other medical care during and immediately afterward in a weather emergency.

When Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, it was called a “once-in-a-generation storm”. In the past few years, we have moved away from using the phrase “once in a generation storm” because of the increase in frequency and intensity of storms not just in Louisiana but around the world. What is the plan to prevent the loss of life in the event of future severe storms such as Typhoon Merbok? What happens if we cannot drive or fly to that community? How would we protect the life and property of Alaskans?

In Alaska, 82% of our communities can only be reached either by plane or boat. What happens if emergency officials cannot get to a community by aircraft or boat due to a “once-in-generation storm”? How are we going to protect those Alaskans? With these challenges, we need to plan and develop plans for the climate crisis, which is already here. This bill would create a Climate Change Commission that would be tasked with developing a comprehensive climate response strategy to identify our most vulnerable sectors and communities and proposing actionable solutions. We strongly support this much-needed legislation and creation of the Commission. This is an opportunity to properly plan and prepare.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and for your consideration of SB 120.