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Opinion: Visit to New York, D.C. gets Arctic message across

By EDWARD ITTA

We Inupiaq like to say that the Arctic Ocean is our garden. It feeds us with its bounty of whales, seals, walrus, ugruk, fish and other subsistence foods. Our harvest is better in some years than in others. Weather, ice and ocean currents all affect the amount of "crops" we are able to feed to our families from year to year.

These are times of change for the ocean. Offshore oil and gas exploration is gearing up. We have seen plenty of evidence that climate change may cause dramatic shifts in the polar ice cap and in our weather. Receding ice could open up new shipping routes between Europe and Asia. We may see increased ocean traffic from commercial fishing boats and tourist ships.

What can we do about it? As mayor, I believe the borough should be engaged in the planning, monitoring, research and mitigation efforts that are being crafted right now as government agencies at all levels respond with a new sense of urgency to challenges and opportunities in the Arctic Ocean. That's why I spent the past week in New York and Washington, D.C. I joined Senators Begich and Murkowski in New York and the three of us made presentations on adapting to climate change in the Arctic to a group of policymakers, business people, scientists and journalists, who then participated in a roundtable discussion.

Policymakers are eager to hear our views, because they recognize that we have the most intimate knowledge of the Arctic and the most to lose if the ocean is not adequately protected. My message to them was that we don't want offshore development, but if it is going to happen, we insist on participating in decisions that will govern offshore activities and precautions. I showed them the Arctic policy principles adopted by ICC in 1984 as an example of longstanding Inuit leadership on protecting the polar region.

In Washington, I met with several of the highest officials in the Interior Department, including Interior Secretary Ken Salazar; his assistant secretary for Land and Minerals Management, Wilma Lewis; Liz Burnbaum, director of the Minerals Management Service (MMS); and Bob Abbey, director for BLM. I stressed that if the government is going to allow OCS activity, then it should set the bar very high when it comes to clean and cautious operations in the water.

I said that the shutdown requirement MMS wrote into Shell's Camden Bay permit is a good step in the right direction, since it gives that requirement the force of law for the first time. I argued for larger deferral areas around traditional Barter Island and Cross Island whaling areas, a moratorium on leasing new acreage, zero discharge of drilling wastes, a cumulative impacts analysis, and the need for better baseline science.

I invited Secretary Salazar to visit the North Slope this summer so he can get a first-hand look at some of the places that mean so much to our people. He agreed to pay us a visit in August.

At NOAA, I talked with two key officials about their efforts in preparing a new Environmental Impact Statement concerning the effects of oil and gas activities in the Arctic Ocean. Rather than the annual Incidental Harassment Authorizations (IHA) that are now issued, they are looking at doing five-year Incidental Take Authorizations. They believe it will build certainty and flexibility into their mitigation requirements, and I can see their point. I told them that we need more monitoring and study of the effects of noise on migrating whales. I discussed the Obama administration's new planning initiative for oceans and coastal areas with the head of the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). CEQ is spearheading the president's effort to deal with climate change. How this new ocean planning program will work is still something of a mystery, but it has a high priority in the administration. I focused on the need to be sensitive about traditional uses of the coastal and ocean areas and to make sure our voices are heard as these large-scale management programs are designed.

At the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we discussed the ongoing management plan for Steller's eiders. I pointed out that our people are conservationists by nature and that education efforts about threatened species can be much more effective than hardball enforcement tactics. I thanked them for establishing a liaison position in Barrow (now held by Emma Huntsman) and said I look forward to better communication between the community and the agency.

Although I spent time with Senators Murkowski and Begich in New York, I was able to meet with each of them again in D.C. I also met with Congressman Young. In each case, I went over a range of issues that we can work on together, and I thanked them for legislation they sponsored in response to my eight-point OCS policy position.

All in all, it was a very productive week. If our voice is going to be heard in the halls of political power, it will be because we take our message to the decision makers and state our point clearly and forcefully. My staff and I will continue to engage with the agencies that shape the regulatory framework for North Slope activities of all kinds. In these challenging times,

these changing times, I want to make sure they can't forget our concerns as they plan the future in offices that are thousands of miles from the Arctic.

Edward Itta is mayor of the North Slope Borough.

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