



Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments

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Via Email: house.community.and.regional.affairs@akleg.gov.

Representative Ortiz, Kriess-Tomkins, Parish, Edgmon, Foster, Kopp, Lincoln, Chenault, Tarr
State of Alaska House of Representatives
Juneau, Alaska
(toll free): 844-586-9085

Re: Testimony for the HCR 19 Governor: AK Native Languages Emergency

Dear Representative Ortiz, Kriess-Tomkins, Parish, Edgmon, Foster, Kopp, Lincoln, Chenault, Tarr;

The Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG) is a tribal consortium founded in September of 1985 with the vision of self-sufficient communities with a shared commitment to promoting common goals and taking responsibility for a culturally integrated economy based on customary and traditional values in a contemporary setting. The ten remote villages Gwich'in and Koyukon Athabascan Tribes that form CATG are: Arctic Village, Beaver, Birch Creek, Canyon Village, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon, Rampart, Stevens Village, and Venetie.

The traditional lands are the upper Yukon Flats, a 55,000-square-mile area encompassing what is now the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (YFNR) and part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Stretching from the White Mountains in the south to the Brooks Range in the north, from the western edge of the Yukon Flats near the Trans-Alaska Pipeline east to the United States-Canada border is of significant historic, cultural and geographic importance to the CATG Tribes. Since time immemorial the CATG Tribes and their tribal membership have lived in reciprocity with these lands and the numerous cultural and linguistic resources therein.

The Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments is actively involved in establishing self-governance in Alaska for our member tribes and supports the following statement: *The Gwich'in/Upper Koyukon recognize and value the fact that living on the land for many millennia has provided them with an extensive body of knowledge, values, beliefs and practices that many people today refer to as Indigenous knowledge. This knowledge, which has been passed down orally through personal experience and spiritual teachings, is the foundation of Gwich'in/Upper Koyukon identity and survival. It continues to have relevance today and draws its' strength from being used, revised and continuously updated to take into consideration new knowledge. The*

Gwich'in/Upper Koyukon hold this knowledge in trust for future generations in the belief that this knowledge is of benefit to themselves and all humanity. The Gwich'in/Upper Koyukon believe the best way to ensure its survival is to continue to use it and share it in a manner that respects this knowledge. Indigenous language is interwoven in all aspects of this statement.

The CATG member tribes are in the Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon languages within the larger Athabaskan or Dene' language family. Both Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon are critically endangered and Gwich'in is linguistically classified as Level 7 – Shifting in *The Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for Threatened Languages* (Baker, 1996, p. 67) by Fishman. In 2006, Dr. Sikorski reported that Gwich'in had 272 remaining Gwich'in first language speakers. The declining numbers of fluent speakers is alarming and a few local efforts initiating language programs continue to reclaim and revitalize oral fluency in Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon. CATG staff, Doyon Foundation, Tanana Chiefs, and the CRCDC Vice-Chancellor, Evon Peter, ANL Professor Dr. Sikorski to develop a range of programs that work towards increasing opportunities for the transmission of language to occur naturally or in a formal school setting from one generation to the next.

CATG has obtained funding from the US Department of Education Office of Indian Education (OIE) Native Youth Community Projects (NYCP) for a 3-year grant to develop curriculum and to gather Elders and fluent speakers in a 2-week Yukon Flats Indigenous Language Revitalization Institute. CATG staff are very thankful for this project but simply put, Indigenous language reclamation efforts require more than one grant.

The local REAA, the Yukon Flats School District has 3 Gwich'in Language Teachers that continue to teach 6-hour of language per day in the school setting. These dedicated professionals have tirelessly worked to teach Gwich'in Language for decades without a unified curriculum, textbooks, printed materials for Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon medium education, or supply budgets. For the local district to continue to fund the Gwich'in Language Teacher position, these professionals often have to work up to 4 hours as a regular classroom aide limiting their instructional time in Gwich'in. Upper Koyukon may be taught in Rampart distance delivery from Fairbanks as part of the Yukon Koyukuk School District but not in the other villages.

It is difficult for all involved in governance at the regional board level to adequately fund education in rural Alaska generally. It is difficult for administrators to balance budgets with shrinking enrollment and to meet the numerous Western academic mandates required, sports related extra-curricular activities, and ever-present energy costs and support a comprehensive language program for two unique languages. It is also difficult for the educators to properly prepare and instruct in Western academics and Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon Languages. Most importantly, it is more than difficult but completely unrealistic that any student achieves oral fluency or become literate in any language that is only offered in one-hour per day. Gwich'in medium and Upper Koyukon medium instruction must be the goal to have appropriate growth for oral fluency at more than a conversational level. I strongly support the development and formation of immersion schools.

This period of time is critical for language reclamation efforts in Alaska and a strong commitment by the State of Alaska with adequate funding for curriculum development and alignment, teacher preparation, material development and printing, and full-time salaries with benefits for Gwich'in and Upper Koyukon Language Teachers. Funding for immersion schools and mentor-apprenticeship programs will help those involved in Indigenous language reclamation efforts move forward as leaders to save our precious Indigenous languages for future generations. It is important that the tribes take leadership in administering schools through compacting, credentialing Indigenous Language Teachers, curriculum development, and teacher preparation and orientation.

Thank you for your recognition of the magnitude of the seriousness of the potential of wide spread loss of the Indigenous languages of Alaska, please consider a financial commitment as well. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. If I can be any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me. Mahsi' or thank you for your efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charleen Fisher". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Charleen" being more prominent than the last name "Fisher".

Dr. Charleen Fisher
Executive Director
Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments