

**SENATE AND HOUSE  
JOINT JOURNAL SUPPLEMENT**

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**January 30, 2024**

**Tuesday**

**No. 11**

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**State of the State Address**

**by**

**The Honorable Mike Dunleavy**

**Governor**

**State of Alaska**

**Before a Joint Session**

**of the**

**Second Session of the**

**Thirty-Third Alaska State Legislature**

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**January 30, 2024**

**Juneau, Alaska**



**The following was submitted for publication:**

Thank you, Lieutenant Governor Dahlstrom, Senate President Stevens, Speaker Tilton, and members of the 33rd Legislature. I want to thank you for the invitation to speak to you tonight.

Before I continue, I want to recognize my wife and the mother of our three daughters Maggie, Catherine, and Ceil: First Lady Rose Dunleavy. Thank you, Rose, for being a great mom and the rock of our household. I'd also like to recognize the members of my cabinet in attendance tonight. Could you please stand and be recognized? Thank you for everything you're doing for the great State of Alaska.

To the members of the Legislature: Welcome, and thank you for stepping up to serve your fellow Alaskans. We can never forget why we're here. We're here to serve the people. Serving the people of Alaska as an educator, a State Senator, and as Governor has been one of the greatest honors of my life. It's a privilege none of us can take for granted. We're reminded of this privilege every year, on these nights, when we squeeze into this chamber, men and women of all backgrounds, side by side. We're in this together, and what's best for Alaskans should never come second to our political differences.

I've had the chance to live the Alaska dream ever since I set out from Pennsylvania for a logging camp in Southeast Alaska more than 40 years ago. I met and married my wife Rose in Alaska; we've raised our three daughters in Alaska; they've gone to our public schools; and now they all work at the Red Dog mine. Anyone who's heard me speak about my daughters probably knew I was going to bring up Red Dog. When I talk about Red Dog, it isn't just because I'm proud of my daughters for succeeding in an industry that's traditionally been dominated by men. It's also important for me to talk about Red Dog because I've seen firsthand how this opportunity transformed Northwest Alaska. This opportunity was realized thanks to the vision of people like Rose's father, Robert Newlin, who was the first chairman of the board of the NANA Regional Corporation. Robert's vision was that his people could walk in two worlds. His vision was that his people should benefit from the past, and the future. He didn't believe in "either-or." He believed in "all of the above" when it came to opportunities for his people.

You know what we didn't hear back then? The concept of "no" applied to every resource project in Alaska, and other opportunities as well. Thank goodness we didn't hear the tired arguments and false choices against Red Dog back then as we hear today, whether it's the Ambler Road, the West Su

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Road, Pebble, ANWR, Willow, and the list goes on and on and on. These tired arguments and false choices are trotted out over and over every time we try to do something that creates jobs and opportunities.

Time after time, throughout our history, we've had to overcome forces aligned against Alaska building our own future. Time after time, we've overcome those forces and proved the naysayers wrong. This resilience and determination was, and still is, a point of pride for many Alaskans. This pride is the basis for the most inspirational motto of any state: North to the Future. But North to the Future isn't just a motto. It's a directive. It's a mission statement. It's a roadmap to the Alaska Dream. We talk a lot about North to the Future. But many of our laws, our regulations, our practices, and our attitudes, unfortunately say something different. We can fix laws and regulations. We can -- and we will -- continue to defend our rights against a federal administration that has taken 56 executive actions against Alaska in the past three years.

If allowed to stand, these actions will turn Alaska into nothing more than a giant snow globe with no future other than a place on a shelf. Fighting back against destructive federal actions is hard, but changing attitudes can be harder.

Many of the forces that have worked against Alaska in the past years have come from outside the state. Today, however, many of these forces are sadly coming from inside Alaska. Too many in this state have gotten very good at saying "no." No to opportunities for other Alaskans, based on a false premise that one person's opportunity is somehow another person's liability. No to mining. No to oil and gas. No to harvesting timber. No to renewables. No to growing more food. No to trucks on roads. No to roads, period. Unless we change this attitude, North to the Future will become "No" to the Future.

I stand in front of you tonight as an anomaly in Alaska's history, as a two-term governor. I didn't run for this office, and I certainly didn't win, on a platform of no to this opportunity or no to that opportunity. I wouldn't be standing here today if I did, and as I begin my sixth year in office, I've learned a few things. I've learned that over the years, we've gone from taking advantage of every opportunity, to, in many cases, working just as hard to prevent opportunities from happening.

I was told by special interests that it was very important for me to understand that I had to oppose many of these opportunities as well. I was told that if I didn't, it would be at my own political peril. I was told bluntly I would lose, and I was told that I would lose big.

At the same time, I was convinced that what I was being told was wrong. This wasn't what Alaskans wanted. What I found out was, instead of the special interests, it was the lady behind the counter, the guy at the hardware store, the plumber, the electrician, the landscaper, they wanted something different. These are the everyday Alaskans that told me time after time that what they wanted was opportunities across the board for them, their kids, and their grandkids.

These aren't people who say "no" to opportunities. Unlike other states, we can't afford to say "no" to any opportunity. Every No means jobs lost. Every Yes means jobs gained. Every Yes means less people on welfare, or food stamps. Every Yes means more kids and more families.

I came from the working class. My values are with the working class, and I've always had faith in them. These are the people that elected me to two terms. Many of them are the people that elected you. We can't forget that. What they voted for was a chance at opportunity. A chance to realize the Alaska dream.

Our job is not to make policy for the special interests, or the chattering classes in the press. They don't need our help. Trust me. Our job is to be the voice for the voiceless. We can't let the voices of special interests get inside our heads and crowd out the Alaskans who elected us and expect us to do the right thing for them.

How do I know that special interests have turned Alaska into a protectionist state? Because I see no cranes. I see no cranes. Some of you may have heard me say that and think I'm crazy. But the fact of the matter is, we may be the only state in the country, or possibly in the world, that doesn't have a number of cranes operating right now, building something, creating a future. And we haven't for some time.

Think about that. You can go to Reykjavík, Iceland, which I know a lot of you did, and they have cranes working, in a country a fraction of our size with the same population as Anchorage. Just a few years ago, there were more than 300 construction cranes working in Iceland.

Why does this matter? The reason there are folks out there that track how many cranes are working is because cranes are a sign of economic activity. Cranes are a sign of opportunities. On the flip side, a lack of cranes is the proverbial canary in the coal mine signaling a lack of opportunities. Why does Iceland have so many cranes working and we don't? They don't have oil. They don't have timber. They don't have gold, or copper. They have very little in terms of the resources that we do. However, what they do have,

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obviously, are great policies. They take advantage of every opportunity and the resources that they do have. They build roads. They build power plants. They say Yes to opportunities. Opportunities for jobs. Opportunities for kids. Opportunities to create wealth. Opportunities for a future.

That should be the conversation we have here in Juneau. How do we create opportunities for our kids and our grandkids? That's the conversation going on in states like Texas, Florida, Idaho, and South Dakota. Those places can't keep up with the people that want to move there, unfortunately including some Alaskans, because of opportunity. People will go where there's opportunity. It's that simple. People will go where they believe they have a future. That should be obvious. People are flooding into our country from around the world because of opportunity, and always have. But in Alaska we're not running down every opportunity. Sadly, in Alaska, we're spending too much energy running off opportunity instead of embracing it.

Then when a Pebble or an ANWR or a Tongass project gets killed, there are some that'll sit back and pat themselves on the back for destroying an opportunity for Alaska. We may be the only place on the planet that does that. And it's a recipe for a slow-moving disaster.

My message to you is to understand what Alaskans voted for. Alaskans voted for opportunity. Alaskans want their kids to have opportunity. As long as I'm governor, I'm going to work to make sure that the Alaska Dream is within reach for anyone who wants to pursue it, so that we can realize our motto of North to the Future. We're in competition for people, and that's why we're proposing policies this year to make Alaska the best place to live, have a family, and do business.

As public servants, we're uniquely positioned to make sure that the Alaska dream is within reach for anyone who wants it, whether those Alaskans have roots that extend back for thousands of years, or for those who've just arrived seeking a better life and new opportunities to work and raise a family. We need everyone. We need more people. There's no question about it, and encouraging pro-life policies that lead to more people having families and kids shouldn't be controversial.

Now, there's some radical groups or people who think fewer people is a good thing. We've seen the results of their efforts over the past 50 years to discourage people from having families, and more recently to restrict and control people through social engineering. The results have been declining birth rates in advanced economic nations around the world, including here in the United States.

Whether you're a student of history or just a casual observer, we can't have the kind of economic activity, growth, and technological advancements that have built civilization over thousands of years without an increasing population. Believing in the alternative is basically sovereign suicide. I reject that alternative. We all must reject that alternative.

If we believe we need more people, the work we do here needs to reflect that. Attracting and keeping people starts with public safety. Public safety is the Number One responsibility for any government, and one of the main reasons I ran for office was because Alaska was on the wrong track. We immediately began by reversing years of cuts to State Troopers and Village Public Safety Officers. We repealed the disastrous policies under SB 91 that contributed to a record-breaking crime wave.

These policy reforms and historic investments are now paying off. Our overall crime rate has declined in every year of this administration to some of the lowest levels in 40 years. Our VPSO budget is up by 81 percent. We have 88 funded positions compared to 55 in 2018. My proposed budget funds another 10 VPSOs plus salary increases. It also adds funding for four investigators in our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Unit. We've cleared the unacceptable sexual assault kit backlog. We've been collecting DNA that's been owed in some cases since the 1990s. These efforts are helping us crack cold cases and bring long overdue justice for victims.

We know we still have work to do. Progress is not permanent, and we can't let our guard down. My proposed budget also includes funding for three new investigators with the Troopers, focused on crimes against children. We must do everything in our power to protect our most vulnerable: our children.

We need more Troopers. We need more Troopers like Kristen Benge. After graduating college, she moved here in 2012 from West Virginia with her husband to live in a dry cabin in Cooper Landing. Not everyone is cut out for that lifestyle, but they loved every second of it. We're thankful they did. She got her master's degree from UAA in 2015 and she joined the Troopers in 2018 on patrol in the Mat-Su Valley. She worked patrol in Nome as well, and now she's an investigator with the Child Abuse Investigation Unit in Palmer. If we're being honest with ourselves, very few of us could do the work that Kristen is doing. She has to see the pure evil in the world personified by those who prey on our kids. She has to see the world through the eyes of victims -- and their families -- as they not only deal with the trauma of these crimes, but the process to secure justice.

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Kristen's work has not only seen criminals brought to justice, but she's also seen victims through their trauma to the other side. She's seen the smiles, received the hugs, and made lifelong connections along the road to recovery for the people she serves. Kristen Bengé represents the best of the Alaska State Troopers; she represents the best of all of us. Kristen, on behalf of grateful Alaskans, will you please stand and be recognized for your public service? Thank you, Kristen.

As Kristen and her brothers and sisters in law enforcement see firsthand every day, our work is not complete. We can't let up for a moment, and I'm asking for your continued support for more resources, for more Troopers like Kristen. With vigilance and a relentless pursuit of justice, we'll build an Alaska where we can all feel safe everywhere, and criminals can't escape justice anywhere.

Another fundamental responsibility of government -- enshrined in our state Constitution -- is to provide for public education. While Governors and Legislators have funded education in the past, what's been lacking is the commitment to ensure our students are performing at the level we expect. For far too long, the drumbeat for more money in the BSA has drowned out nearly every other conversation. The conversation always seems to begin and end only with money. As long as the conversation is only focused on money, it's difficult to discuss improving outcomes.

Thanks to a single vote in 2022, we've finally started having that conversation about outcomes. As a result of that moment, we're focused on implementing the Alaska READS Act to ensure that every student -- every student -- achieves proficiency in reading by the third grade. We know this can be done. We know Alaska students can succeed when they're given the right opportunity in the right environment.

This past November, research from Harvard confirmed that Alaska's charter school system is the best in the country. That's right. You heard correctly. Alaska's charter school system is leading the nation. This fact should be a cause for celebration. Every educator, every administrator, and every school board member in Alaska should be embracing the opportunity to learn from what's proving successful.

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School in Anchorage is an example of that success. In 2004, Martha Gould-Lehe, then a teacher at Muldoon Elementary, approached her colleague Sheila Sweetsir about founding a school honoring the traditions and values of Alaska's Native people. After

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receiving their charter in 2007, the school began operations in a small church. Then an old furniture store. Then a leased space for 10 years, followed by a brief stay at Bettye Davis East High.

Sheila, now the principal of the school, received the keys to the former Abbott Loop Elementary last summer. No matter what space they occupied for the past 17 years, the school's leaders focused on rigorous academics combined with Indigenous values and the wisdom of their elders. These values coexist in harmony under the same roof at this charter school. Sheila's leadership contributed to the results that made Alaska's charter school system the best in the nation.

It's not about money, and it's not about the student's background. It's about the environment, connecting with students, building relationships, and valuing the individual. With the right environment and the right approach to learning, our students can succeed beyond our wildest dreams.

Sheila, her staff, and her 282 students are proving it every day. Sheila was raised in the small village of Galena on the Yukon River. She's Koyukon Athabascan, and she's a role model for every educator no matter where they teach. Sheila, please stand and be recognized on behalf of your efforts, and for all the efforts of your staff and students who are setting the standard for charter schools around the country. Thank you, Sheila. You've got a lot to be proud of, and we're proud of you, too.

When we focus on results, every student, every parent, and every teacher will play a role in making Alaska the best in the country to receive a public education. The classroom is where the rubber meets the road. It's where we can add the most value. The classroom is where the student learns to read, to learn math and science, and to forge a positive relationship with their teacher.

That's why I introduced House Bill 106 last year, and I'm calling on the members of the Legislature to approve legislation to provide incentive payments to classroom teachers. These payments will be \$5,000 to \$15,000 per year for the next three years, depending on where they teach. Our classroom teachers should be paid well for the work they do.

Investing in our classroom teachers isn't just the right thing to do. It'll also strengthen our ability to recruit and retain them in a highly competitive world. In fact, I'd like to go ahead and make a recruiting pitch right here, right now. If you're a classroom teacher in Alaska, or you're interested in being one, just go online to [gov.alaska.gov/teachers](http://gov.alaska.gov/teachers). That's [gov.alaska.gov/teachers](http://gov.alaska.gov/teachers), and you can see the level of incentive payments by school district.

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If you're teaching in Anchorage or Fairbanks, you can earn an extra \$15,000 over three years if you stay in that job. In our small, rural, or remote villages, you can earn an extra \$45,000 over three years. For a teaching couple in a remote district, you and your spouse can earn an extra \$90,000 in those three years. Again, you can find all this information online, and we hope you'll be able to take advantage of this opportunity when the Legislature passes this bill. This legislation will not only put money where it belongs: in the pockets of our classroom teachers. It'll also be accompanied by valuable research to demonstrate the benefits of improved recruitment and retention. It's imperative that this legislation passes this year.

Just as we've proved we can be the best at charter schools, we'll prove we can be the best at recruiting and retaining classroom teachers nationwide. To lead, we must break the cycle of just doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. That means putting a focus on outcomes such as reading. It means investing in our classroom teachers rather than only a formula.

We need great teachers. We need more teachers like Sara Titus. Sara's father served for 24 years in the Air Force and eventually retired at Eielson. Sara grew up wanting to be a teacher, and earned her degree in elementary teaching from UAF. While at UAF, she asked if she could take an assignment in the Yukon-Koyukuk School District. When she arrived in Ruby, she was paired up with a mentor named Anne Titus. If that name sounds familiar, it's because Anne is now Sara's mother-in-law, and her family's home is in Ruby, where she's taught for eight years. She teaches pre-school; she teaches elementary reading; she's a reading interventionist; she runs the STEM program.

In short, Sara does it all. Sara, could you please stand and be recognized for your service, and for all the classroom teachers across Alaska stepping up to serve our students? Thank you, Sara, for all you do.

There's no doubt Alaska got lucky with Sara, and we're thankful we did. But we can't count on luck, and Sara has also seen too many teachers come and go from Ruby and the Y-K School District. What's heartbreaking to Sara isn't just seeing teachers leave Ruby, but leave the profession entirely. As a fellow educator, this troubles me greatly as well. By focusing on the classroom, we can, and we will, reverse the cycle of turnover. By doing so, we'll give our students and our teachers the opportunity to succeed.

For decades, we've tried education policy based on little more than what comes after a dollar sign. I'm asking you to join us in a new approach based on what happens after a student walks into a classroom. We need to prepare our students for the competitive world we're in, and that includes higher education. Before I became Governor, enrollment at the University of Alaska was declining. But like the conversation today around K-12, the focus was mostly on the budget back then.

Since taking office, we've taken a different approach. We've worked with University leadership to fulfill their mission. That mission is to prepare students for the jobs of today such as nursing and STEM fields, and the jobs of the future in emerging energy technologies, Arctic research, unmanned aircraft, mariculture, and more.

Implementing a different approach wasn't easy, and it wasn't popular. But like our approach to public safety, the evidence shows we're making progress. This fall, for the first time in 10 years, University enrollment is up year-over-year. The freshmen class is up 14 percent over last fall and the University reports that 80 percent of its graduates find jobs in Alaska within a year. As a proud graduate of the University of Alaska and the parent of two University graduates as well, this is great news.

My proposed budget provides additional resources for the University to attain the highest research certification level available. With your support for these resources, the University of Alaska will be a global leader in the research and workforce development we need for today and tomorrow.

Public safety and education are critical to achieving our initiatives to make Alaska the best place to live, work, and raise a family. Just as critical will be lowering the cost of energy and housing. We'll be introducing legislation to eliminate electrical tariffs on the Railbelt system that currently stand in the way of transmitting the lowest-cost power. By eliminating these tariffs, we'll transform the system into a public highway rather than a series of toll roads. By doing so, we'll lower costs for ratepayers and create new opportunities for independent power producers.

We've also introduced legislation to improve the economics of our Cook Inlet natural gas, and we'll continue to advance the AKLNG Project that will deliver low-cost energy to Alaskans. Whether it's coal, natural gas, advanced nuclear, or our abundant renewable resources, we must pursue every energy opportunity to secure affordable and sustainable supplies for Alaska.

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In addition, upgrading the Railbelt transmission system is another step to reduce the cost of energy and build reliability. We now have a tremendous opportunity to do both with a significant federal grant secured by the Alaska Energy Authority. This project will increase access to affordable power from Bradley Lake and other renewable sources. It will build the redundancy we need to ensure that the lowest-cost power -- from any source -- can move from Homer to Fairbanks any time and without interruption. This project, and other necessary infrastructure improvements, will take years to complete.

It'll require patience. It'll require investment. It'll take our skilled tradesmen and women to complete. These projects will create jobs that will attract a skilled workforce, but keeping that workforce in Alaska will also require affordable housing.

Affordable energy and housing are magnets for economic growth, and while Alaska's population hasn't grown much over the past decade, it has relocated. The Mat-Su Valley has attracted thousands of new residents with affordable land, affordable housing and local policies that enable economic growth.

Like our charter schools, we should be open to learning from policies that are so clearly succeeding by creating an environment that embraces freedom and opportunity. At the same time, as someone who's lived on and off Alaska's road system, I well understand the challenges to building affordable housing in rural areas.

As a superintendent in Northwest Alaska decades ago, I recognized this need for infrastructure and housing in rural Alaska. I worked with the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation and our federal delegation to fund teacher housing in rural areas. That program is marking its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Now known as the Last Frontiers Housing Initiative, the program has resulted in more than 500 housing units in more than 80 remote and rural communities since 2004.

Thanks to the work at AHFC, its dividend to the state has also nearly doubled this year, to \$48 million. With your support, AHFC will use part of this dividend to create a new mortgage down payment assistance program. We estimate this new program will be able to help 1,100 to 1,300 families purchase their first home. We're also working to lower the price of these first homes by reducing the cost of materials. We're addressing this in part through the state lumber grading bill that I was able to sign last year with your support. We have abundant timber resources, and creating an in-state supply

chain for critical building materials will lead to more -- and more affordable -- housing for all Alaskans. We're required under the constitution to develop our resources for the benefit of all Alaskans, and we can do better when it comes to our forests.

Consider Sweden, located at the same latitude as Alaska. In 2022, the value of their forest industry was \$18 billion; that's \$18 billion. They aren't clear cutting their lands, and they aren't just sitting back and watching their forests burn.

Meanwhile here in Alaska, we make about \$1 million from timber sales. Last year we spent 90 times that amount fighting fires. Rather than continue to watch our timber resources burn, we're instituting new policies to enhance our forest management. These new policies will help prevent fires, stop the spread of disease, and create new jobs and revenue streams through carbon sequestration, biomass, and increased timber sales.

At the same time, our oil, natural gas, and minerals of all kinds will remain in high demand around the world for decades to come, and we'll continue to demonstrate that nobody can develop those resources better than Alaska.

There's no doubt we've done well developing some of our natural resources, but like our forests, we can do better developing our vast lands and waters to feed Alaskans. Our lands and waters support more wild harvest of fish, game, and plants than any other state by far. Alaskans take great pride in filling their freezers and providing for their families and their communities through these harvests. It's a uniquely Alaskan way of life -- it's a source of pride and tradition -- and it's a way of life that I'll always fight to protect for every Alaskan.

But we can't rely solely on wild harvests to provide food security for all Alaskans. We once produced about half the food we consumed in Alaska through local farming, but now we rely on imports for about 90 percent of what we buy. We took our eye off the ball over decades as globalization and just-in-time logistics were refined to the point where it became cheaper to ship a gallon of milk to Alaska rather than produce it here.

Even before the pandemic, most Alaskans know what happens when a ship or a barge is late, or doesn't make it. The store shelves get stripped down pretty quickly. These globalized systems we've relied upon work great, until they don't.

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Alaska is blessed with abundant and clean lands and waters, and we can develop these resources to become food independent once again. This will increase food security and reduce costs for Alaskans.

How will we do this? We talk with our Alaskan farmers with operations of all sizes who've been producing food for decades, and those who are just getting started.

Tarn Coffey is one of those farmers. His parents moved to Alaska from Texas because they saw opportunity, and his father found a great living in the oil industry working on the Slope. That opportunity provided everything his family needed, including a small farm near Talkeetna. Tarn found an opportunity that matched his love for farming when the state held its first auction for ag land at the Nenana-Totchaket project in 2022. He cleared his land and planted his first crops last spring, including the sweet corn he'd been growing for a dozen years in his backyard in Nenana. Tarn doesn't believe the skeptics and the pessimists who don't see a future for agriculture in Alaska, let alone that you can grow sweet corn here. Instead, he's proving them wrong. If you don't believe me, you can see for yourself on his Coffey Farm YouTube channel.

Like his father before him, Tarn is following opportunities where they lead. He's pursuing them rather than opposing them. He's not just building a bigger backyard farm, either. He plans to grow his operation to commercial scale, and that's what Alaska needs to truly increase food security for our state. Tarn, will you please stand and be recognized for the pioneering spirit of you and your fellow farmers and ranchers who are working to build food security for Alaska? Thank you, Tarn, for your can-do attitude.

To support our working farmers and encourage new ones like Tarn, we're building an environment of opportunity for them to succeed. Over the past year, we've provided \$1 million dollars in feed cost assistance to livestock owners impacted by weather-related shortfalls in 2022.

We also paid the freight costs to import 1,000 tons of barley into Alaska to feed and sustain our livestock herds until last fall's harvest in Delta. This past November, the Division of Agriculture took another big step to support our farmers and ranchers by allocating \$1 million dollars to establish a feed grain reserve in Delta. This reserve will protect our livestock producers and allow for larger herds by increasing our in-state feed supply. It'll also provide an additional market for our grain farmers who want to grow their business.

We're also in the process of expanding power lines in Delta, and upgrading roads and bridges in Nenana to reduce costs and improve access. We're also updating our Cottage Food regulations to expand opportunities for home-based food producers.

We'll reduce risks with legislation we've just introduced to increase access to capital through the Agriculture Revolving Loan Fund. This bill will also provide premium support for crop insurance. In addition, this legislation will repeal institutional purchasing limits on Alaska grown products for the next five years. This will provide a market for producers who want to scale up their operations.

State dollars should stay in Alaska, and state dollars should be used to support Alaskan producers. Food security and independence for Alaska became imperative for me in the early days of the pandemic. I'll never forget the phone call with a warning that the Port of Tacoma might shut down and halt the ships that supply Alaska with most of our food. As I think back on the past five years, I've received a lot of phone calls presenting Alaska with challenges both natural, and manmade.

I also think about how we've overcome these challenges. We've seen challenges from negative prices for oil and a hostile federal administration trying to shut us down. We've recovered from a pandemic, a historic earthquake, landslides, floods, wildfires, and the remains of a typhoon. Including the 7.1 earthquake in 2018, I've been Governor during 35 state disaster declarations. That averages out to one about every 54 days. As Alaskans, we know it's not a matter of if a disaster strikes, but when. As Governor, I also know that I can always count on Alaskans to pull together in tough times. I never cease to be amazed at the character and resiliency of the Alaskans I meet during these times.

This past fall, just before Thanksgiving, those tough times came to Wrangell. On the evening of Nov. 20, a massive 450-foot landslide engulfed homes, blocked the road and cut off power lines. Despite the wind, the rain, the cold, and the dark, the community sprang into action. Fishermen maneuvered their boats to cast light onto the disaster area. Volunteers and first responders braved the harsh conditions and plowed through the mud searching for survivors.

Thankfully, they were able to rescue Christina Florschutz, who'd been trapped in the slide and miraculously survived into the next day. Tragically, six of our fellow Alaskans perished: Christina's husband Otto, and the entire Heller

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family of Timothy and Beth, and their three children Kara, Mara, and Derek. Words are never enough to express our grief when a disaster like this strikes as it has before, and unfortunately will again.

But even in the worst disasters, our communities are home to good people who do their best to recover and rebuild. Wrangell is just that kind of place, and Mayor Patty Gilbert is here to represent her community. She'll be the first person to tell you that she doesn't deserve any credit for the actions of those who rushed headlong into danger. Mayor Gilbert may not have ended up covered head to toe in mud like those first responders and volunteers, but their spirit is with her tonight.

Mayor Gilbert is originally from Omaha, Nebraska. She was a teacher all over the country and even in Venezuela. She and her husband began their Alaska adventure in Cordova, where he was a hospital administrator and she worked for Prince William Sound Community College. They eventually made it to Wrangell, where she continued teaching for another 23 years. Along the way, she served two terms on the city council and then on the Borough Assembly. She's the President of the Wrangell Medical Center Foundation, which raises funds to pay travel expenses for Alaskans who need treatment for cancer. She also helps raise money for student scholarships in health careers. Mayor Gilbert gives back to the community that has given her so much, and we're glad she's here tonight. Mayor, will you please stand and be recognized on behalf of the great Alaska community you serve and represent? Thank you, Mayor, for being here tonight.

Alaska will always have its challenges, but like the people of Wrangell, we don't run from them. We face them head on. That's what makes us Alaskans. It isn't easy, but we weren't sent here to shrink from challenges or pretend them away.

I wasn't sent here -- for two terms -- to do things the way they've always been done. We weren't sent here to do things the way they've always been done. We weren't sent here to bow to establishment forces and entrenched special interests holding back progress for Alaska.

We're sent here to represent folks you don't see walking these halls every day, telling you how to vote on this or that, or what appropriation to make. I want to introduce you to one of those people. Her name is Jenna Marshall. Jenna is the store manager at the Subway on Government Hill in Anchorage. It's a frequent lunch spot for me, and we always get great service at Jenna's

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store. Jenna is busy working, raising a family, and making ends meet. She doesn't have the time to fly to Juneau or the resources to hire a lobbyist to influence us. She has two kids. Dylan is 4, and Matthew is 14, and he's here tonight as well.

Folks like Jenna often work when the rest of us are off. They work late at night when our day is over. They get up early, and they don't have time to be tired. At one time in our lives, most of us were just like her. Jenna is here tonight to represent the Alaskans who aren't here every day walking the halls and visiting your offices. She's here to remind us -- the 61 of us in this room -- who we really work for. I work for her. You work for her. It's families like Jenna's who benefit the most from the PFD. They're the ones impacted the most when the PFD is shorted.

Some of the special interests or some members of the press wonder why I fight for the PFD, or they want me to give it up entirely. The reason I fight for the PFD is because it's an Alaska institution that benefits the working families of Alaska. So, as long as I'm governor, I will continue to fight for the PFD for the people of Alaska like Jenna and her family. Jenna represents hundreds of thousands of Alaskans just like her who don't have the time to think a lot about politics.

And let's be honest, for politicians like us, if there isn't somebody lobbying on your behalf, it can be easy to forget about folks like Jenna. If folks like Jenna do think about politics, they're just hoping people like us do what's right by them, or at the very least don't screw things up.

But all too often, we waste precious time here in Juneau bickering over petty things that hundreds of thousands of Alaskans simply don't care about. Jenna wants to get to work on safe roads and live in a safe community. She wants everyone to have access to affordable housing. She wants families like hers to have access to affordable childcare that works for them. Jenna, it's you -- and the people you represent -- the hundreds of thousands of Alaskans like you that I committed to when I ran for this office. You're the foundation of our Republican form of government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

I ran for this office to help make an Alaska that creates opportunities for you, Jenna, your family, and hundreds of thousands of Alaskans like you. That's what this is all about. It's not about us. It's about you. Jenna, could you please stand and be recognized on behalf of all the working men and women in the

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great State of Alaska? Thank you, Jenna, and thank you to all the working-class Alaskans you're representing here tonight. We're sent here to represent every Alaskan like Jenna. To lead. To do the right thing on their behalf. To say yes to opportunities.

So, to the special interests, don't be disappointed if you knock on my door asking me to kill an opportunity. You'll be knocking on the wrong door. On the other hand, if you have an idea, an opportunity, and a dream that will move this state forward and benefit Alaskans without coming at the expense of others, I'll clear my schedule to meet with you.

In the end, leadership requires conviction in one's values to make the right decisions, especially in the face of daunting odds. Political history is littered with examples of those who have taken on these odds and lost. Defeat is always possible for those who try, but for those who don't, it's guaranteed. I'm willing to accept the risk of losing. I won't accept the risk of not trying. Success will be within our reach, if we're willing to seize the opportunities in front of us.

No to the Future, or North to the Future. The choice is up to us.

**Please report corrections to the Senate Secretary's office.**