Subsistence Listening Sessions

Community Conversations On Subsistence And Stewardship

Findings Report

Summer / Fall 2026

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Executive Summary

The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) invited Tribal and Native Corporation leaders, Elders, subsistence harvesters, youth, natural resource staff, community leaders, and interested community members to participate in the Subsistence Listening Sessions held in various communities.

These listening sessions represent a beginning, not an ending. The knowledge, concerns, and recommendations shared by communities provide an essential foundation for AFN's continued work to advance Alaska Native subsistence rights. As AFN moves forward with its Subsistence Strategic Action Plan and broader advocacy efforts, the voices gathered through this process will remain central to shaping priorities and informing action. The work ahead is significant, but so is the collective strength of Alaska Native communities.

Together, we will continue working toward a future in which subsistence rights are protected, cultural traditions are sustained, and every generation has the opportunity to live connected to the lands and waters that have sustained our people since time immemorial.

Arctic Slope - Utqiaġvik

July 7, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"You're the stewards of your land and your animals. And that's what we've been taught for generations," Billy Adams

The Meaning and Value of Subsistence

Subsistence is described as culturally rich, tied to gifts from God, and encompassing harvesting, preparation, smoking, and jarring—more than just feeding families. It is a core part of cultural identity, particularly for communities on the North Slope.

Wildlife Management and Hunting Regulations

Current hunting limits are a concern. The Western Arctic caribou herd limit was reduced from 15 per year to five bulls per person as the population declined. There is a fear of a "tier hunt" system if populations drop further.

Tribal Role, Co-Management, and Representation

A key issue is the lack of a strong, formal role for federally recognized tribes in state subsistence management. The federal system is beginning to incorporate tribal input (e.g., nominating seats for the Federal Subsistence Board), but the state system has no comparable mechanism.

Major Threats and Challenges to Subsistence

Economic Barriers: The high cost of fuel and equipment is a significant challenge, with hunters prioritizing bills and mortgages over subsistence activities. One participant noted traveling 250 miles by boat for a hunt, with fuel prices as high as $7 to $22 per gallon.

Climate Change and Environmental Shifts: Coastal erosion, flooding, and changes in freeze-up/breakup timing threaten access to food sources and make travel unsafe. Animal migration patterns are becoming earlier and less predictable.

Industrial Threats: There are significant concerns about potential harm from increased ship traffic, such as the year-round transport of natural gas from Prudhoe Bay, and the risk of an oil spill.

Modern Distractions: Younger generations are increasingly drawn to video games and the internet, showing less interest in traditional subsistence activities.

External Influences: Special interest groups, environmental/animal rights groups, and sports hunters often have more influence in decision-making. External activists, sometimes using celebrity influence, attempt to speak for the region on issues like ANWR, which is viewed as a form of colonization.

Global Food Supply Issues: A conflict in the Strait of Hormuz is disrupting global fertilizer supply, which is expected to lead to a global famine. This makes subsistence increasingly important for survival in rural Alaska.

Wildlife Management and Hunting Regulations

The state is perceived to be using outdated baseline numbers for harvest quotas. There is a need for hard population numbers and updated, region-specific studies to counter false perceptions and set accurate quotas, but funding is a major constraint.

The North Slope region is fortunate to have a dedicated wildlife management department, a resource other regions may lack.

A need was identified for laws to protect sensitive hunting data (e.g., animal locations) from being publicly accessible to sport hunters.

Tribal Role, Co-Management, and Representation

A key issue is the lack of a strong, formal role for federally recognized tribes in state subsistence management. The federal system is beginning to incorporate Tribal input (e.g., nominating seats for the Federal Subsistence Board), but the state system has no comparable mechanism.

Participants expressed a desire for real, equal co-management where agencies do not make decisions without full partner input. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) was cited as a model for its tribal authority and enforcement power.

There is a significant resource disparity in decision-making forums. Small tribes and Native representatives often lack resources to attend lengthy Board of Fish/Board of Game meetings, where commercial and recreational interests have a stronger, well-funded presence. This reduces Native influence.

Low participation from North Slope communities in key meetings like AFN is a concern. A call was made for required attendance by officers of all tribal boards and committees. The selection process for representatives is critical. It was suggested that members should be chosen by fellow hunters based on experience, and that fiduciary training is needed for board members.

Northwest - Kotzebue

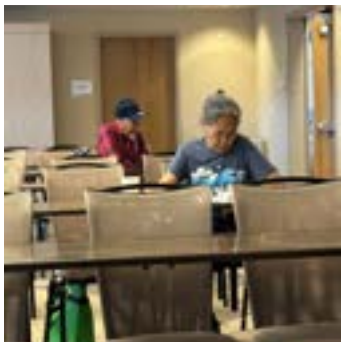
July 15, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"You're not only harvesting for yourself, subsistence-wise, but you're harvesting for Elders, your friends, your family. You're always sharing. You're always willing to give and you would expect nothing in return. That's what subsistence means to me because all our ancestors and grandparents have lived off the land," Robbie Kirk

The Meaning and Value of Subsistence

Subsistence is described as life, provision for family and elders, and sharing without expectation. It embodies spiritual and practical relationships with the land, water, animals, and sky.



Wildlife Management and Hunting Regulations

The management system is highly complex, involving multiple jurisdictions (Federal Subsistence Board, Board of Fish, NOAA) with no effective co-management framework. Closures, competition, and fragmented science/policy processes strain communities and create tension with non-local users.

Tribal Role, Co-Management, and Representation

If the state takes over management, the Federal Subsistence Board's existence would be re-evaluated, and changes to the State Boards of Fish and Game would be required to ensure adequate subsistence representation.

Values and Cultural Practices of Subsistence

Core values include "no waste," humane practices, language/math/law literacy, intergenerational knowledge, community networks, and reciprocity.

Cultural practices are shifting due to environmental changes, such as transitioning from historic permafrost cellars to a reliance on AC for food storage.

There is a distinct recognition of the differences between Alaska Native subsistence and non-Native participation, though collaborative community contributions are acknowledged.

Challenges and Threats to Subsistence

Environmental Changes: Climate change impacts include fall storms, delayed snow, floods, red tide affecting shellfish, and shifting ecological cycles (caribou/moose migration and predation).

Safety and Access: Trapping seasons are shortened by later freeze-ups and earlier thaws. Beaver expansion keeps lake ice thin, creating severe safety hazards. Greater travel distances to access resources increase safety risks.

Economic Burdens: Rising fuel and equipment costs, coupled with the high cost of living and logistics in rural areas, strain local communities.

Research Gaps: There is a significant lack of sustained funding for on-the-ground wildlife and fisheries research (e.g., no aerial fish surveys on Chum Lake since 2012; no game surveys in 25 years). Current systems underfund local/traditional knowledge compared to Western science.

Top Subsistence Priorities and Non-Negotiables

Non-Negotiables: Secure access to subsistence lands, sustained Alaska Native representation on resource management boards, and priority access for local Alaska Natives and their descendants to resources managed under the sustained-yield principle.

Local Management: Build local capacity by managing lands with community-based biologists and strategies. Ensure management is simple, avoids criminalizing local people during shortages, and avoids barriers that distance people from resources.

Broader Alignment: Align subsistence with educational systems that honor language and culture, establish climate adaptation/flood mitigation planning, and ensure federal management fulfills its fiduciary duties to prevent economic desperation from driving development decisions.

Federal, State, and Administrative Options for Reform

Federal Options
Repealing the extinguishment clause of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). A total or limited repeal would necessitate creating an entirely new framework under Aboriginal hunting/fishing rights, potentially eliminating Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act's (ANILCA's) Title VIII.

Amending ANILCA to provide a "native plus" or "rural plus" priority, or adding more seats for subsistence users.

Increasing congressional appropriations for management and specific material needs.

State and Administrative Options
Administrative actions could include executive orders for co-management, increased use of indigenous knowledge, redefining "rural," and revising the Federal Subsistence Board's structure.

Amending the Alaska Constitution to allow for a rural preference, aligning state law with ANILCA. However, past efforts have failed, and this carries significant political risks as it requires a public ballot.

Bristol Bay - Dillingham

August 12, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"I think we should be able to have subsistence because it's fun, and it's good for us to go fishing and do something. Our ancestors used to survive on fish, and it's our culture to do that.," granddaughter of Tiana Wyand

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Birthright and heritage central to existence; attack on culture via funding cuts and silencing Indigenous knowledge must be resisted.

Stewardship of lands, animals, and fish practiced for centuries; right to continue for future generations.

Enjoyment, identity, and survival rooted in ancestral practices; elders' teachings of sharing and no waste guide behavior.

Access to traditional foods is the common thread across regions; legal acknowledgment that subsistence should be a right.

Greatest challenges and responses

Administration and policy mindsets favor powerful user groups; need "sustainability for all."

Regional Priorities and Solutions

Holistic ecosystem protection—fur, fins, feathers, flippers—and clean water; presence in regulatory rooms; address funding deficits.

Community Priorities and Policy Recommendations

A constitutional or statutory amendment is viewed as the strongest protection for subsistence but requires supermajorities, statewide education, unity, and preservation of ranked-choice voting.

Western-style management and complex regulations fail subsistence users, enabling industrial and sport priorities; many Natives are forced into sport frameworks rather than true subsistence.

Severe resource declines—salmon, caribou, and moose—threaten food security, health, and cultural identity; offshore industrial fishing undermines local biomass.
Political engagement and unity—voting at all levels, defending ranked-choice voting, and securing tribal representation on federal councils—are critical to counter industry influence.

Subsistence is heritage, identity, stewardship, and moral practice rooted in sharing and respect, not merely a legal category.

Tribal-led direct management is essential: Guardian Networks, Alaska Native Corporations asserting land management, and subsistence-centered maps and ordinances.
Funding is a structural barrier; advocacy, board participation, and studies (e.g., ANS) need sustained financial support; consider Native-led self-taxing to build dedicated funds.

Concrete policy ideas include nine-nautical-mile offshore buffers, prioritizing Native quotas first, simplifying permits, hardship/ceremonial access expansion, and elder license exemptions.

Youth education and organized community hunts/fisheries are vital to transmit knowledge and engagement.

Non-Negotiable Protections

The right for Native people to feed themselves, prioritized before other allocations.

Funding for education on rules and participation.

General access without excessive licensing burdens, especially for Elders and children.

Challenges and Threats to Subsistence

Administration and policy mindsets favor powerful user groups; need “sustainability for all.”

Money and industry influence dominate; propose Native self-tax funds, assign economic value to subsistence to gain regulatory traction.

Rising costs and “death by paperwork” shut out local users; simplify access, expand hardship/ceremonial provisions, restore Elder exemptions.

Governance and Advocacy

Pursue Tribal seats on federal councils; defend ranked-choice voting; hold board members accountable; expose conflicts of interest.

Build Guardian Networks for direct enforcement and data; unify Tribes and corporations to assert sovereignty.

Reframe subsistence as heritage and Indigenous rights; educate officials and public; recruit youth.

Top Subsistence Priorities

Yukon salmon collapse; subsistence includes cultural/therapeutic practices beyond food.

Protect local biomass from industrial fleets with nine-nautical-mile buffers; explore federal/state attachments.

Tribal-led mapping and management plans in partnership with Native corporations; unity and youth education.

Federal, State, and Administrative Options for Reform

Pursue Tribal seats on federal councils; defend ranked-choice voting; hold board members accountable; expose conflicts of interest.

Build Guardian Networks for direct enforcement and data; unify Tribes and Native corporations to assert sovereignty.

Reframe subsistence as heritage and Indigenous rights; educate officials and public; recruit youth.

Kodiak Island - Kodiak

August 21, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"We have to do everything we can to protect it, whether that's regulation or monitoring water quality and making sure that the next seven generations can eat our foods," Selah Kone

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Participants described subsistence as survival, food security, sharing natural resources, and connection to land and community.

Possible Solutions

The idea of using private land wildlife management principles was introduced, where effective habitat management by landowners could lead to access incentives.

Greatest Challenges

A participant described a critical issue affecting subsistence and fisheries on the Karluk River, where Koniag owns about eighty percent of the land and drainage.

Key Threats to Subsistence: Commercial, Sport, and Management Practices

Participants raised concerns that trawlers damage the ocean bottom and waste fish, with one speaker contrasting large-scale waste with strict penalties for individuals who exceed fish limits.

Concerns were raised about seiners catching jack king salmon, overfishing in general, and the impacts of lodges, charter boats, and transporter boats. One speaker noted 5 million pounds of fish leave the state via charter vessels and trawlers waste 5 million pounds of cod annually.

Management was criticized, with speakers noting that commercial and sport hunting/fishing account for a far greater take than subsistence (less than 2% statewide). Local river closures often align with sport fishing closures, indicating subsistence is not a priority.

Management inconsistencies were also cited, such as charter trolling limits being reduced while trawlers/seiners are not proportionally constrained.

Several speakers said management decisions and commercial activity affect subsistence access and supported more direct Native involvement in management, including dedicated seats on policy-making boards.

Defining Identity and Subsistence Rights

A speaker critiqued the state definition of subsistence users, which allows one-year residents to qualify, undermining generational ties. They suggested communities adopt their own definitions recognizing tribal enrollment and cultural continuity.

A speaker criticized federal blood quantum determinations that exclude individuals from Native status and access to traditional foods, calling for a change to the system.

There was a call to clearly define what constitutes subsistence versus trophy hunting to prevent abuse.

Proposed Changes in Subsistence Management

A pilot "caretaker cohort" was described, focused on teaching that traditional management is about managing people as caretakers within an ecosystem.

A proposal was made for a state-level branch led by Native people to manage subsistence for Alaska Natives.

Participants emphasized the importance of being part of the solution by recognizing agency constraints and working collaboratively to develop practical, shared solutions.

Another speaker urged aligning regulated seasons with natural seasons and local living patterns, suggesting area-specific year-round subsistence planning.

Land Access, Landowner Rights, and Regional Management

A speaker described village corporation policies in Bristol Bay that restrict hunting and gathering on corporate lands to prioritize shareholders and descendants, with reported local support.

It was noted that Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs) are private landowners and can restrict access. While rural priority does not currently apply to ANCSA lands, potential law amendments could enable it.

A speaker advocated for regional input and nuanced management rather than broad, uniform solutions.

The idea of using private land wildlife management principles was introduced, where effective habitat management by landowners could lead to access incentives.

Another speaker encouraged corporations to act as land managers, using the Natural Resources Conservation Service for stream protection and enhancement.

Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta - Bethel

August 26-27, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"To me, subsistence is much more than harvesting food. It is our way of life. It connects us to our lands and waters, our families, our ancestors, and future generations. It is how we learn responsibility, respect, patience, and sharing. It brings families to fish camp and gives Elders opportunities to pass down knowledge, language, and skills to younger generations." Charlee Korthuis

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence is defined as the foundation of his community's way of life, providing balance, strength, and a connection to ancestral knowledge.

Regional Priorities and Solutions

Identified salmon and moose as top priorities, criticizing the conflict with outside hunters and policy failures like the Yukon River Salmon Treaty not applying offshore. Condemned the doubling of the trawl quota under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the divisive nature of the CDQ program.

Greatest challenges and responses

The state of Alaska has a history of disregarding Tribal input and denying indigenous rights, making state control over subsistence a non-starter. The ultimate goal is Tribal self-management, as communities know best how to manage local resources.

Challenges and Threats to Subsistence

Subsistence Crisis and Its Impacts: Alaska Native communities face an acute crisis from salmon and caribou declines, exacerbated by climate change. This has led to severe food insecurity, health disparities, cultural erosion (disrupting the transfer of traditional knowledge), and profound frustration with a way of life under constant assault.

Voter Apathy as a Critical Threat: Extremely low voter turnout among Alaska Natives (as low as 1.5-3 out of 10 people) has severely weakened their political power, leaving subsistence rights, rural school funding, and community services vulnerable to cuts and unfavorable policies.

Ineffective and Biased Management: There is a deep-seated perception of systemic discrimination and hypocrisy in state and federal management. Subsistence fishing is often closed while commercial trawlers continue operating, leading to massive bycatch and resource depletion. Co-management is widely seen as a facade, with governments retaining ultimate veto power.

Call for an Offensive and Unified Strategy: Participants argued that constantly defending subsistence rights from a position of weakness is failing. A proactive, "offensive" approach is needed, which includes reclaiming political power through mass voting, asserting tribal sovereignty, amending federal laws like ANILCA, and potentially pursuing a state constitutional amendment.

Tribal Sovereignty and Self-Determination: A recurring theme was the need for tribes to have real authority in resource management. This includes creating and implementing their own policies (as demonstrated by Tuntutuliak), centering Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), and demanding more tribal seats on bodies like the Board of Fish.

The Importance of Unity and Advocacy: Unity among Alaska's Tribal nations is essential to resist government attempts to divide communities. Speakers called on AFN to facilitate this unity, build trust, and lead a coordinated effort to hold governments accountable and carry community voices forward.

Subsistence as a "Way of Life": A critical distinction was made between subsistence as a "way of life" and a "livelihood." Speakers insisted this legal and philosophical difference must be upheld in law and policy to protect its unique cultural and spiritual significance.

Advancing Tribal Sovereignty and Food Sovereignty

The region is frustrated with a complicated dual management system that has proven ineffective.

There is an opportunity to adopt a more proactive strategy by:
- Amending federal laws, such as ANILCA.
- Seeking a state constitutional amendment.

Instead of relying solely on state or federal laws, the possibility of developing Tribal procedures and policies should be explored:

Tuntutuliak has done so by passing a resolution to open a fishery for its members.
- This action asserted their sovereignty without external interference.

It is crucial for the community to stand firm and fight for their rights:
- Previous heartfelt testimonies have gone unheard.
- Legal action beyond the federal government is necessary to protect their violated civil and subsistence rights.

Consider framing efforts around food sovereignty and exploring global alliances with other Indigenous peoples and fisherfolk to strengthen their impact.

Interior - Fairbanks

August 31, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"What does subsistence mean to you?' To me, it has always been about our relationships with each other and with our families and our communities, and what we're experiencing together, and how we heal together, and our survival. And so, relationships I feel like are such a core part of what this means to us," Joy Huntington

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence is the foundation of Indigenous identity, wellness, and survival, encompassing cultural transmission, spirituality, traditional medicine, and intergenerational knowledge. Its decline threatens the entire social fabric of Alaska Native communities.

Regional Priorities and Solutions

Tribal governments must be elevated to equal governmental status with state and federal entities. Until this occurs, Native voices remain structurally marginalized in policy processes.

Greatest Challenges

Economic barriers, particularly high fuel costs, prevent families from practicing subsistence, contributing to mental health crises, cultural disconnection, and community hardship.

Core Challenges, Priorities, and Pathways Forward

State and federal management systems have failed, prioritizing commercial and extractive interests over legally mandated subsistence rights, leading to the collapse of salmon, crab, and other critical resources.

Full indigenous sovereignty and tribal co-management are the primary solutions, with the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and the Woodland Cree self-management model cited as replicable successes.

Restrictive regulations—including blood quantum requirements, commercial fishing prioritization, and D1 land policy changes—pose immediate threats to Tribal cohesion, service access, and subsistence rights.

Generational knowledge transfer is at critical risk, as fish camp closures, game decline, and technological distraction sever youth from traditional skills and cultural identity.

Coalition-building, civic engagement, and legal literacy are essential tools for Native communities to advocate effectively, including engaging bipartisan legislators, influencing appointments, and participating in boards and councils.

Intertribal unity is necessary but challenging, with internal divisions (e.g., interior vs. coastal fishermen, inter-tribal conflicts over fishing areas) complicating collective advocacy.

Proactive land planning, renewable energy transitions, and tribal land-use strategies are needed to address imminent climate-driven migration, shifting land values, and post-extractive industry revenue risks.

Key Findings and Strategic Priorities

The Meaning and Urgency of Subsistence
Speakers define subsistence not merely as a food procurement strategy but as the structural foundation of cultural identity, spiritual life, intergenerational knowledge, and community wellness. The closure of fish camps, the disappearance of salmon runs, and the decline of game populations are not logistical inconveniences but existential cultural crises. Children and grandchildren retain a deep, instinctual desire to participate in these practices—a desire that must be met with intentional cultural infrastructure.

Failure of State and Federal Management Systems
There is broad consensus that existing state and federal resource management frameworks have failed Alaska Native communities. Driven by maximum sustainable yield models and commercial interests, these systems have overseen the collapse of king salmon, chum salmon, crab, and other species.

Sovereignty, Tribal Governance, and Co-Management
The most consistently proposed solution is a fundamental restructuring of governance relationships—elevating tribal governments to co-equal status with state and federal entities. The ongoing erosion of this status through state agreements, blood quantum restrictions, and consortia pressure.

Boundaries and Land Rights
Imminent D1 land policy changes as a near-term threat requiring immediate strategic response.

Economic Pressures and Structural Inequities
High fuel costs are a recurring, concrete barrier to subsistence practice. Fuel prices prevent families from reaching hunting and fishing areas, directly contributing to mental and behavioral health deterioration. Alaska's natural resources generate profits largely extracted by outside interests, while local communities absorb environmental and social costs without proportionate benefit.

Generational Knowledge Transfer and Youth Engagement
The closure of fish camps is mourned as the loss of the primary institutional setting for transmitting traditional knowledge. Describe the simultaneous urgency and fragility of youth engagement—children want to learn, but modern technology, lack of opportunity, and resource decline create structural barriers. Proposed solutions include school-based fish processing programs, fish and culture camps, classroom legal education, and intentional youth pathways back to communities.

Bering Strait - Nome

September 14, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"We know this land the best. We have been here for thousands of years, and right now, our traditional knowledge isn't being taken into consideration alongside Western science. Western science is seen as superior to traditional knowledge, and that needs to change. And I think the only way that's going to change is if we are the ones making decisions," Kelsi Ivanoff

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Participants described subsistence as food security, health, culture, identity, and a system of sharing that must remain under stronger local and Alaska Native control.

Subsistence Has a Direct Tie to Health

Land-based foods are more compatible with people's bodies and richer in iron than store-bought food. Store-bought food can cause digestive problems and has been linked to illness, cancer, and weak bones. Access to Native food helps keep elders active and could reduce pressure on medical facilities and medevac flights. Continued access to rich Native food is presented as a health necessity, not merely a preference.

Greatest Challenges

Speakers said fixed regulatory calendars no longer match these conditions. A season may open too early or too late for a particular animal or fish. Fish may pass while residents are prohibited from harvesting, or moose seasons may occur when temperatures make safe processing difficult. Residents who observe the animals, water, and weather should help set openings instead of relying on schedules made in Washington, D.C., or Juneau.

Subsistence Sustains Food Security, Culture, Health, and Community Ties

Culture and identity: Subsistence keeps traditions alive and carries culture, identity, language, knowledge, and practical skills to coming generations. Several residents called it life itself rather than one economic or recreational activity. They said losing access would leave young people without their strongest tie to who they are.

Food security: Residents said employment is limited in many villages. One participant estimated that about 70 percent or more of people in her village are unemployed. Another community member said only about 30 to 35 percent of residents in her village are employed. A Koyuk resident estimated that the community relies on subsistence for 50 percent to as much as 70 percent of its needs. Public assistance and store food do not last through the month, while rural food and fuel prices keep rising.

Income and material use: Harvested resources provide food and clothing. People also trade products or sell them for secondary income where few jobs exist. Speakers stressed that people take what they need, avoid waste, and share with elders, relatives, and others who cannot harvest for themselves.

Sharing across communities: Harvests are shared beyond immediate families and may travel north or elsewhere in Alaska to people who cannot obtain those foods where they live.

Intergenerational knowledge: Hunting, fishing, gathering, processing, weather reading, travel safety, and community responsibility are learned together. Severe storms and poor ice now expose young hunters to greater danger than hunters faced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. That makes the transfer of knowledge more urgent.

Social stability: Participants said youth are already teaching one another, taking peers into the country, and keeping each other connected to their identity. Those activities can keep young people out of trouble and build pride in where they come from.

Competing ways of life: Participants described the worry, anxiety, stress, and trauma that come from trying to maintain subsistence while holding a state or federal job and paying for a house, vehicle, and equipment. It was stated that many people across Nome and surrounding villages struggle to balance Western economic demands with their subsistence responsibilities.

Climate, Erosion, and Changing Waters are Reducing Safe Access

Weather and environmental change now affect when people can harvest, whether they can travel safely, and whether food can be processed before it spoils.

Storms and ice loss: Storms have become more frequent and solid ice is no longer as dependable as it was in earlier decades. Young hunters therefore face more dangerous conditions.

Missed hunting windows: Weather changed too soon and too quickly for some to make their hunt this year. Narrow windows can close before families can respond.

Loss of processing ground: Erosion associated with Typhoon Merbok removed a processing site near a Native allotment. A family still has access to the allotment, but they said they otherwise have nowhere else to process food.

Persistent rain: A participant received 12 red salmon and prepared them for drying. The fish received no sun, and all 12 molded. She compared the conditions with nonstop rain three years earlier. The same weather threatens people's ability to dry fish and bearded seal.

Warm processing conditions: Moose were traditionally taken in October, when cooler conditions kept flies away. Current seasons may coincide with warm weather. Meat thaws quickly, and people now have to spray it to control insects.

Changing currents and channels: The Nome River's path has changed over the past 70 years in the area. Causeway construction and extension alter currents through Norton Sound and contribute to changing ocean contours and new islands around Safety Sound.

Navigation hazards: Familiar river routes had changed. Formerly navigable routes may no longer be reliable.

Broader climate shifts: El Niño, distant storm systems, and climate change keep changing local weather and marine life. Reports of a white shark, whale, or other animal offshore from Saint Lawrence Island during the summer as one possible sign of ecological change.

Mining, Land Transfers, Shipping, and Construction Threaten Habitat

Residents from the region around Brevig Mission described strong opposition to a proposed foreign-owned graphite mine. They said the affected basin supports salmon, northern pike, whitefish, seals, beluga, moose, caribou, birds, and other species. Fish move through a connected route from the Bering Sea to Port Clarence Bay, the channel, and the river system. The area was described as part of a Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean basin waterway.

Industrial contamination could kill vegetation and cause cancer. The community requested a protective distance of 200 miles. The central argument was that money cannot replace food, culture, or the way of life inherited from ancestors.

Federal D-1 lands and Native private lands
A resident warned that transferring federal D-1 lands to the state would expose them to broad development. She asked for help preventing a transfer that could affect subsistence areas.

Alaska Native people own more than 44 million acres of land, and that ownership should come with a stronger role in determining how hunting and fishing occur on their private lands.

Marine traffic and coastal infrastructure
Fishing vessels, tour boats, and other traffic interfere with marine mammals migrating north into the Arctic and south again. Open-water traffic may divert animals or otherwise disturb their routes.

Causeway extensions and rock placement near Nome with altered currents and shore contours. Such construction affects more than the immediate project site because current changes extend through Norton Sound.

Industrial fishing and divided jurisdiction undermine salmon management
Participants identified trawl bycatch and fragmented state-federal authority as major threats to salmon and other subsistence species.

Local Authority, Rural Priority, and Traditional Knowledge are Non-Negotiable

Participants consistently stated that communities have managed resources for generations. They take what they need, share surplus, and adjust to local conditions. Written state and federal rules arrived later and made ordinary practices more complicated.

Rural priority: Resources should first support people living closest to them. A participant opposed unrestricted access by hunters from Fairbanks or Anchorage where local populations cannot sustain it.

Community timing: Local residents should help determine openings because they know current animal movement, weather, and processing conditions.

Traditional knowledge: Western science should not be treated as superior. Native people have known the land for thousands of years. Agencies claim to respect Indigenous knowledge but do not implement or hear enough of it.

Tribal self-policing: Tribes can enforce subsistence rules more effectively than distant state or federal authorities. Self-policing would require substantial work and support. Communities want more than the limited co-management that has been practiced over the past 50 years.

Community safety decisions: Local authority once included managing bears around settlements. Community men located dens and controlled bears as they emerged to protect families. Residents should again have a principal role in wildlife decisions.

Native land control: It was asked why Native corporations and Tribes cannot govern use of land they own. Tribal enforcement is a possible role within federal funding and authority.

Participants said Tribes and Native communities should make decisions rather than only respond after agencies develop policies.

Cook Inlet - Anchorage

September 16, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"I know what my ancestors wanted. And I know what they wanted for the rest of us too. And it was beautiful, you know. We are the living proof as we walk on this world," Valerie Tony

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence is described as a top priority, a way of life, and the primary means of survival for communities. One speaker mentioned their community is 70% unemployed and relies heavily on fishing and hunting.

The Main Subsistence Priority

Elders teach hunting "with your stomach, not with your eyes," meaning only take what is needed for sustenance and share the catch with community members unable to provide for themselves.

Philosophy of Subsistence

The relationship between humans and their food is sacred, with one speaker expressing that all food has a soul. There is concern that core values like honesty are eroding, compromising what it means to be a "real human being."

Management, Governance, and Regulation

Advocacy for Self-Management: A long history of dealing with state and federal governments has yielded no significant changes, leading to calls for self-management. It was proposed that Alaska Native communities manage their own wildlife and fish resources through compacting, similar to successful healthcare and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) programs. Tribes should be co-managers in subsistence management.

Local vs. External Management: Frustration was expressed that external biologists are managing Alaskan resources instead of utilizing local and indigenous talent who possess deep-rooted knowledge and a vested interest. Successful models in Canada and Australia were cited.

Regulatory Confusion and Mistrust: Government regulations are viewed as growing increasingly complex, described metaphorically as a "fog" causing Indigenous peoples to lose focus on their goals. An Elder from an Iñupiaq village recounted a history of resisting state and federal regulations, such as those on migratory bird hunting and data collection on subsistence catches, viewing them as attempts to gain control.

Enforcement Issues: The state is perceived as acting like a police force rather than a collaborative partner. An anecdote was shared about a cousin being jailed for not pulling educational fish permit nets out on time. The state was criticized for spending money on aerial surveillance instead of investing in local collaboration.

Licensing and Access: An individual who relocated to Anchorage expressed confusion over her lifetime subsistence license, as "No Shooting" signs and access fees for berry picking limit its use. It was clarified that while the license is valid, all location-specific rules, rural-only seasons for migratory birds, and land access regulations still apply.

Fishing Restrictions and Hardships

- Residents in one YK area village are reportedly allowed only 20 salmon to feed over 200 people.
- Villages face closures, high gas prices for fishing trips (over 25 miles), and gear confiscation if they fish in closed areas, contributing to a feeling of being "forgotten."
- The village of Tyonek, though rural and foundational to AFN, has lost its subsistence rights and is subject to state rules allowing fishing only one day a week.
- Communities on the road system, like in the Cook Inlet region, have been penalized and displaced from traditional fishing sites due to development and overpopulation.

Challenges and Threats to Subsistence

Economic and Social Pressures

- Villagers face an economic burden from needing multiple licenses for hunting.
- Commercial fishing permits are being sold off because local fishers find it unprofitable, partly due to troll fleets intercepting salmon.
- Rising shipping costs for necessities strain household budgets, impacting what can be spent on subsistence activities. In response, one village has been teaching children traditional skills, as families can no longer afford equipment.

Environmental and Health Crises

- **Climate and Environmental Threats**: A 2008 projection suggested ice seals could be extinct by 2030 due to a lack of sea ice. Increased Arctic shipping poses a massive pollution risk to the marine ecosystem. Concerns were also raised about "chemtrails" destroying water and land.

- **Water Quality**: Local rivers are experiencing weaker currents and siltation, which covers gravel riverbeds and impacts fish populations, a change linked to the appearance of beavers. In Cook Inlet, pollution sources include deicing fluid from the Anchorage airport and an aging wastewater treatment facility.

- **Indigenous Health Crisis**: It was stated that Alaska Natives have the highest rate of colon cancer in the world, with the North Slope being the most affected area globally. This was linked to subsistence food safety, environmental conditions, and the replacement of traditional fats with processed foods. A participant questioned the lack of transparency from health institutions like the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium on this issue.

Potential Solutions and Future Management

Legal and Constitutional Avenues
Suggestions included using the "PYK line" in the Alaska Constitution to have the federal government take over management for lands above it, or using the UN Charter to relist Alaska as a territory to undergo decolonization, citing New Caledonia as an example.

A "rural subsistence plus Alaska Native priority" was discussed, which would maintain priority for rural residents while giving all Alaska Natives priority access regardless of where they live. Restoring Aboriginal hunting and fishing rights was acknowledged as a long-term personal goal.

Policy and Infrastructure
A proposal was made to create a high-speed freight rail system along the pipeline corridor to reduce environmentally risky shipping.

The Bering Sea Elders Group's policy goals include reinstating and protecting the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area, permanently protecting it from bottom trawling, and co-developing a holistic plan to address the ecosystem disaster.

Advocacy and Collaboration

Advocacy Requests
Participants urged AFN to lobby against "chemtrails" and large data centers. It was stated that having Tribes as co-managers should be a non-negotiable principle.

Collaboration
Relationships with environmental organizations like the Alaska Wildlife Alliance (AWA) are improving, with joint projects blending scientific methods and traditional knowledge to address fish and wildlife declines.

Governance Principles
It was emphasized that people appointed to decision-making bodies should have a broad perspective, and that Elders and youth must be included in discussions to preserve traditional values.

Southeast - Juneau

September 21, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"Our people cannot thrive if they cannot be who they were meant to be, and this is a part of who we were meant to be. And so as we think about our responsibility, while we're alive, we have to fight tooth and nail. We don't have a chance to just say, I'm tired. I'm busy. I have other priorities. This is it. If we cannot be who we are, if we cannot thrive as we are meant to be, then all the other things fall," Laaganaay Tsiits Gitanee

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence means providing for family and centers on caring for Elders and community sharing now constrained by decline; Spirituality embedded in practices; traditional foods sustain ancestral ties and must not be negotiated away.

The Main Subsistence Priority

Year-round subsistence designation for king salmon; Indigenous participation in allocations; climate/ocean stewardship.

Philosophy of Subsistence

Central to culture, intergenerational knowledge, and ancestral connection; a non-negotiable foundation of well-being.

Reclaiming Subsistence: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, and the Future of Indigenous Governance

Identity and practice
Subsistence means providing for family; current king salmon rules treat locals and tourists alike despite scarcity.

Unity and political roadmap
Consensus across regions and electing aligned leaders are critical.

Subsistence is an inheritance enabling thriving; restrictions erode belonging and health.

Fisheries and local management
Calls to designate king salmon as subsistence for year-round security; involve Indigenous voices in international allocation.

Cape guardians report charter and crab fleet pressures in nursery waters; invasive green crab advancing.

Sovereignty and legal innovation
Proposals to limit charter permits, mandate Alaska Department of Fish & Game sport catch data, and prepare candidate lists for key appointments.

Challenge ANCSA's extinguishment of Tribal hunting/fishing rights; consider Tribal citizenship for non-human relatives to protect salmon and whales.

Document Indigenous law of the sea; convene via AFN to unify governance approaches.

Reclaiming Subsistence: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, and the Future of Indigenous Governance

Jurisdiction and federal-state dynamics
State over-selection of unconveyed lands extends jurisdiction; seek federal amendments to preserve protections.

Distinguish political status from racial identity to defend subsistence as a governmental right.

Structural reforms and accountability
Enforce subsistence priority in state law; define sustainable yield; protect FSB Native seats; expand Native decision-making authority.

Explore restructuring federal agencies and creating a state Department of State-Tribal Relations to house subsistence management.

Movement-building and capacity
AFN urged to unify 229 tribes, coordinate legal/scientific capacity, and pair lawsuits with public education.

Engage Native people living outside their home communities through fellowships and verified comment portals, while establishing support systems for providers, including legal defense and equipment resources.

Education, Elders, and wellness
Statewide Elder convenings to guide priorities; community listening sessions to sequence 2024 resolution actions.

Teach regulatory compliance to youth; address digital divides for Elders; build organizational wellness support.

Aleutian & Pribilof Islands - Virtual

September 22, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"Subsistence means more than just putting food on the table. It's our connection to our land, to the water, to our culture, families, and our ancestors. It's harvesting and processing, preserving and sharing traditional foods, and teaching those skills and knowledge to the next generation. It's in our area. Subsistence is also intertwined with commercial fishing, because that income helps families afford the boats and the fuel and the equipment and the high costs to remain in our communities. So subsistence is a part of keeping our people, our culture, our communities strong for future generations," Arlene Gunderson

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence encompasses more than food; it is a deep connection to land, water, culture, family, and ancestors.

It includes harvesting, processing, preserving, and sharing traditional foods, and passing skills to the next generation.

Commercial fishing is interwoven with subsistence because income enables families to afford equipment and high living costs in their communities.

Subsistence activities are essential to sustaining people, culture, and communities for future generations.

Challenges and Threats to Subsistence

Environmental Issues
Land contamination and warming waters impede traditional harvesting methods. Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) produce toxins in blue mussels, making them unsafe; HABs are occurring later in the season.

Flood-site contamination levels are challenging, as is determining cleanup responsibility. Climate change amplifies natural disasters (e.g., storms with hurricane-force winds) that damage infrastructure.

Management and Regulation
Subsistence hunting seasons do not align with actual animal presence; geese and ducks often arrive after the open season ends.

Sport hunters are frequently prioritized, causing frustration among subsistence users. State and federal managers link subsistence opportunities to sport hunting and refuse to recognize traditional fall and winter hunt times.

Subsistence is not treated as the priority use for species like the emperor goose, despite legal requirements.

Management of ANCSA Lands

Some corporations are further ahead in land management (e.g., certain Southeast corporations).

A legislative option could allow the rural priority to apply to ANCSA lands.

Corporations can implement permit processes to limit hunting access, restricting it to shareholders or permit holders.

A major difficulty is securing law enforcement (state troopers) to enforce trespass on corporate lands, especially where rights-of-way complicate access.

Co-Management and Tribal Sovereignty in Subsistence

The current co-management council structure, requiring consensus, enables state vetoes and ties subsistence to sport hunting.

There are calls to amend the Migratory Bird Treaty Act to recognize traditional hunt times.

Traditional harvesting was stated not to be the primary threat to species populations. Proposal: Tribes should have direct management over species; current Western science methodologies are viewed as outdated and too slow to keep pace with climate change.

Tribes should be involved from the outset of decision-making, not only invited to comment after decisions take shape.

Blood quantum requirements for marine mammal harvesting and inter-agency inconsistencies (NOAA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife) undermine tribal sovereignty.

Southeast - Ketchikan

September 28, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"I think we should all think about, making sure that we're fed, making sure that nobody goes hungry on our land. And making sure to codify law that ensures that our Aboriginal title is not extinguished, that ensures that we have access, that seven generations from now, my brother's children will be that good steward who has access to their food source, and then making sure that the environment can sustain that in a good way," Gloria Ilsxilee Stáng Burns

Subsistence, Sovereignty, and Cultural Continuity

Subsistence as Holistic Identity: Subsistence is repeatedly defined as a holistic cultural, spiritual, and community practice, not just a food source. It encompasses moral teachings, intergenerational knowledge, community sharing, healing, and a deep connection to the land and water.

Call for Tribal Sovereignty and Control: A central, non-negotiable demand is the return of land and water management to the Tribes. Speakers argue that Tribes hold the essential Traditional Ecological Knowledge and are the rightful and most qualified stewards.

Criminalization of Tradition: Restrictive, complex, and patchwork laws effectively criminalize traditional subsistence activities, forcing community members to operate in fear or outside the law to feed their families and maintain cultural practices. This leads to a disconnection from the land and contributes to social ills.

Community Priorities for Subsistence and Tribal Sovereignty

Failure of Current Management Systems: Current federal and state co-management systems (Board of Fish, etc.) are widely viewed as failures. There is deep distrust of government agencies due to a history of broken promises, lack of meaningful Tribal consultation, and policies that favor outside interests.

Multi-faceted Threats to Resources: The degradation of natural resources (declining fish, berries, etc.) is linked to a combination of mismanagement, overuse by outside interests (commercial/charter fishing, tourism, logging, mining), environmental changes, climate change, and invasive species like the European green crab.

Need for Representation and Unity: There is a strong call for direct Tribal representation on all regulatory boards, stronger unity among Tribes, and for AFN to take a more active, front-line role in defending subsistence rights through political advocacy and direct action.

Barriers to Participation: Significant language and literacy barriers prevent Elders and traditional knowledge holders from participating effectively in the intimidating and complex policymaking process.

Historical and Legal Foundation: Speakers cite the 1867 treaty transferring Alaska from Russia to the U.S. to assert that Native inhabitants retained inherent rights that are now under constant threat and must be legally protected and codified.

Core Concerns and Calls for Action

Environmental Issues: Speakers noted a drastic decline in salmon, berries, and deer. This is attributed to climate change altering animal behavior, pollution from cruise ships, and the imminent threat of the invasive European green crab.

Cultural & Spiritual Core: Subsistence is a "soul-deep" practice that teaches moral values, connects to the afterlife, provides healing, and is defined by the process of sharing with family and Elders.

Government Failure & Distrust: State and federal systems are called "ineffective" and a "stupid cyclical cycle". The state is seen as untrustworthy, prioritizing regulations over people and having a history of destroying fisheries. A state takeover of subsistence is considered a non-negotiable threat.

Tribal Sovereignty as the Solution: Speakers demand that Tribes be treated as sovereign governments, not "stakeholders". The solution is for Tribes to have stewardship, with Tribal laws given equal recognition. This includes community-based self-policing and boards composed of Alaska Natives who understand survival.

Economic & Industrial Threats: The traditional "way of life" is being displaced by tourism. The charter sport fishing industry, trawling bycatch, and resource extraction like mining and logging directly degrade habitats and deplete resources.

Legal & Regulatory Criminalization: "Patchwork laws" force people to become "criminals" to feed their families. Harvesters face constant fear and confusion from law enforcement and need clear, simple guidance.

Call to Action for AFN: AFN is urged to move beyond education and get on the "front lines," engaging in civil disobedience if necessary. It must be more representative of all regions and act as a unifier to support sovereign tribes, because division makes the community vulnerable.

Copper River - Copper Center

October 1, 2026

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"It's our way. It's our way of life, and also it's our traditional law that we have the salmon to feed our family. We don't take more than what we need, and we've always been you know obedient to the law that's been policies that's been placed. Sometimes we have to fight it in court. And the state of Alaska has fought our people for our way of life for a long time," Faye Ewan

Subsistence, Sovereignty, and Cultural Continuity

Subsistence is Culture, Not Just a Resource: Subsistence is passionately defined as the foundation of cultural identity, spiritual well-being, ancestral connection, and community cohesion, not merely a source of food.

Tribal Sovereignty and Self-Management are Essential: There is a strong consensus that co-management with state and federal agencies is failing. The only viable path forward is seen as full Tribal sovereignty and direct management of traditional lands and resources. Mandatory Tribal consultation is a non-negotiable principle.

State and Federal Mismanagement Threatens Resources: Speakers express deep-seated distrust in state and federal management, citing depleted fish and game populations, inadequate enforcement, and policies that prioritize commercial, recreational, and industrial interests over the legally mandated subsistence priority.

The Meaning of Subsistence

It is described as "soul food" that provides emotional and physical sustenance.

It serves as a vital, direct connection to the practices and heritage of ancestors in an increasingly modern world.

It is the core of cultural identity, connecting people to their lands, language, and community, and is how they teach children and care for Elders.

For some, the term itself is now associated with pain and struggle due to the constant fight for their rights, while others reject it as a colonial construct, preferring "customary and traditional rights."

Key Threats and Challenges

Regulatory Barriers: State and federal permitting processes are identified as a major obstacle, with personal accounts of being denied permits for critical cultural events like memorial potlatches. Hunter safety courses are seen as a barrier preventing traditional family-based teaching.

Land Policy: Federal land transfers (e.g., Unit 13, Copper River area) are proceeding without Tribal consultation, threatening to convert subsistence lands into sites for mineral extraction and recreation where hunting would be forbidden.

Resource Mismanagement: The state is criticized for poor decisions leading to the depletion of caribou and salmon, inadequate enforcement, and misaligned hunting seasons. Commercial fisheries bycatch is seen as a major ecological threat impacting upriver subsistence.

Political Disadvantage: Native communities feel out-organized and out-funded by powerful special interest groups (commercial fishermen, outside sport hunters) at regulatory meetings. Electing the right governor is seen as critical, as they appoint key fish and game decision-makers.

Generational Gap: A primary internal threat is the potential failure to pass on knowledge and a sense of ownership to the youth. There's a call for active engagement and education to prevent the loss of their heritage.

Proposed Solutions and Calls to Action

Assert Sovereignty: The ultimate goal is for Tribes to "own" and manage their own resources, with government agencies consulting them, not the other way around.

Political Mobilization: There is an urgent call for AFN to mobilize its members for board meetings with the same intensity as a political campaign and for individuals to vote for supportive candidates.

Legal and Legislative Battles: The fight must move from local meetings to courtrooms and legislative bodies. AFN is urged to take the lead in these fights.

Youth Education: Implement formal curricula on ANCSA/ANILCA in schools, create political internships, and provide hands-on experience through mock board meetings and direct participation.

Demand Representation: A key strategy is to secure designated Tribal seats on state-level bodies like the Board of Game and Fish and increase Indigenous representation on all relevant boards.

Build Unity: It is crucial to build relationships and unity among Native regions to present a united front against external pressures.

Chugach - Virtual

October 7, 2026

Credit: Richard Burke

What We Heard: Subsistence, Stewardship, and Tribal Sovereignty

"Means of survival, living in a rural Alaska Native community, who isn't on the road system, where costs are a lot higher and climbing. It's a lot of survival for us, living out here and living off the land, living off the sea. This everything we've been taught. How are we still here? Subsistence is a big part of that, so I feel like subsistence is a big part of survival," Dannielle Malchoff

What does subsistence mean to your community?

Subsistence is a means of survival for rural Alaska Native communities, especially those off the road system facing high and rising costs of living. It is a way of life rooted in traditional knowledge passed down through generations.

Elders emphasize “traditional foods” and practices of harvesting and gathering; the term “subsistence” is seen as a modern, generalized label that can obscure deeper cultural meaning.

Subsistence connects people to culture, identity, land, water, and family, fostering character, values like hard work, stewardship, respect, sharing, and responsibility to future generations. Urban Natives rely on activities like berry picking and fish processing to stay connected.

Sharing traditional foods (e.g., seal) strengthens community bonds. For communities impacted by the Exxon Valdez oil spill, subsistence remains tied to a long healing process as ecosystems and food sources have not fully recovered.

Cultural revitalization is central—subsistence practice supports younger generations relearning traditional ways; roadblocks to these activities derail cultural progress.

Proposal to create an Elder council and a statewide archive of values to unify guidance and wisdom; Elders’ stewardship principles should anchor future management.

Subsistence Crisis, Resource Depletion, and Access Pressures

Communities face severe shortages of fish, particularly salmon and halibut, with rivers once abundant now empty due to combined pressures of weather, overfishing, and increased outside access.

Outsiders and tourists are fishing local areas and creeks without permission, including within historically protected boundaries; wasteful practices leave edible parts discarded that could feed families.

Environmental impacts persist from the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill—oil remains on beaches; herring and seaweed have not recovered, creating fear of unsafe foods and loss of trust.

Increased road access brings larger boats and more competition; tourism and cruise traffic (e.g., in Seward) correlate with fewer marine mammals in the bay. Development is eliminating traditional berry-picking areas.

Historical events (e.g., the 1964 earthquake and tsunami) disrupted transmission of hunting knowledge. High fuel costs and lack of equipment, especially in communities without federal recognition, constrain harvesting.

Data Protection, Trust, and Stewardship Principles

Significant mistrust exists regarding agency data collection and use; communities fear sharing sensitive harvest information will invite outside competition or be used against them.

Priority to establish community control over subsistence data, ensuring protection before any sharing, and building secure data-sharing frameworks that respect local sovereignty.

Guiding values for future management include true stewardship practiced for thousands of years, care for Elders and children, sustainability, non-waste, respect, responsibility to future generations, sharing, and never taking more than needed. Wasteful bycatch from trawling was cited as a major violation of these values.

Governance, Rights, and Management Reform

Subsistence should be treated as a fundamental, inherent right; participants stressed that no more ground should be given up and rights must be reclaimed.

Strong desire for Native communities to manage their own fish and wildlife resources; state and federal agencies should not hold primary authority. Tribes seek representation on decision-making boards and meaningful involvement from the start of any process, not just consultation on pre-set proposals.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge must be recognized and weighted equally with Western science; current agency data collection is seen as underfunded and inaccurate. Proposed changes include unifying state and federal management calendars (Board of Fish, Federal Subsistence Board) to address issues efficiently; reinforcing ANILCA's rural subsistence priority over sport and commercial fishing; and establishing Native preference for subsistence regardless of residence.

Some participants advocated that Tribes have the final say on decisions affecting traditional lands and waters, with genuine Tribal consultation by entities issuing fishing permits.

AFN's Role, Regional Unity, and Youth Engagement

Calls for AFN to lead unified advocacy focused on education, stewardship, and Tribal unity, with consistent presence and testimony at the Board of Fisheries, Board of Game, Regional Advisory Councils (RAC), Federal Subsistence Board, and North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

Build next-generation capacity in both traditional food systems and leadership: encourage youth to pursue agency careers and board seats (Board of Fish, Board of Game, Federal Subsistence Board). Existing resources include the Sitka Conservation Society's Federal Subsistence Management Program curriculum, hard-copy and online materials, school district partnerships, and a Southcentral RAC youth non-voting seat.

Similarities Across the Regions

The AFN Subsistence Listening Sessions demonstrated both the strong common ground that exists among Alaska Native communities and the distinct circumstances that shape subsistence from region to region. While participants described different species, ecosystems, regulatory challenges, and local experiences, the underlying message was remarkably consistent: subsistence is not simply a means of obtaining food. It is a way of life, a source of cultural identity and community wellness, and an essential connection between generations, lands, waters, and traditional knowledge.

Fish concerns emerged as a significant statewide theme across the listening sessions, particularly concerns about salmon declines, commercial fishing impacts and bycatch, restricted harvest opportunities, and the effectiveness of current management systems. Although each region faces distinct ecological and regulatory conditions, participants consistently emphasized that protecting fish resources is inseparable from protecting food security, cultural continuity, and Alaska Native subsistence rights.

Similarities Across the Regions

Common Ground Across Alaska
Subsistence is a way of life, not simply a resource.

Across the listening sessions, participants consistently described subsistence as much more than harvesting food. It encompasses family, community, spirituality, health, stewardship, sharing, traditional knowledge, language, and responsibilities to Elders and future generations. In many communities, the ability to hunt, fish, gather, process, and share traditional foods is directly tied to cultural continuity and identity. Participants repeatedly emphasized that losing access to subsistence means losing opportunities to teach younger generations who they are and where they come from.

Communities want a meaningful role in managing their own resources.
A strong and recurring theme across regions was frustration with state and federal management systems and the limited role afforded to Tribes and local communities. Participants questioned management decisions made far from the communities most directly affected and called for greater Tribal authority, meaningful co-management, and, in many cases, direct tribal or community management of fish, wildlife, and lands. The report's broader findings identify restructuring the relationship between Tribal governments and state and federal entities as one of the most consistently proposed solutions.

Participants also emphasized that Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) must be treated as an essential source of expertise, rather than simply consulted after decisions have already been developed. Across the sessions, community members described knowing when animals arrive, how conditions are changing, where resources are available, and when harvesting can be done safely because they live with these lands and waters year-round.

Similarities Across the Regions

Environmental change is affecting the ability to harvest safely and successfully.
Every region described environmental changes that are affecting subsistence. Participants reported changing migration patterns, declining fish and wildlife populations, warmer temperatures, changing freeze-up and breakup, erosion, flooding, changing waterways, storms, habitat loss, and other ecological changes. These changes do more than affect resource abundance—they alter when and where people can safely travel, harvest, process, and preserve food.

Access is becoming increasingly difficult.
Economic barriers were another common thread. High fuel prices, equipment costs, transportation expenses, licensing requirements, and other costs make it increasingly difficult for families to reach hunting and fishing areas. The report identifies high fuel costs as a recurring barrier across sessions, with participants describing the direct connection between rising costs, reduced harvesting, and increasing hardship.

Participants also described access barriers created by development, changing land ownership, federal and state regulations, permitting requirements, road and transportation changes, and restrictions on traditional harvesting areas.

Participants expressed concern about the loss of intergenerational knowledge.
Across regions, Elders emphasized the importance of teaching young people how to hunt, fish, gather, process, preserve, share, and care for the land. At the same time, participants described fewer opportunities for youth to participate because of declining resources, closed or inaccessible fish camps, high costs, changing family circumstances, technology, and increasingly complex regulations. The concern was not simply that young people may lose a skill—it was that they may lose an essential connection to culture and community.

There is a widespread desire for stronger collective advocacy.
Participants repeatedly called for greater unity among Tribes, regions, and Native organizations. Many asked AFN to help bring regional voices together, strengthen political and legal capacity, increase Native participation on boards and commissions, and ensure that community knowledge is represented in decisions affecting subsistence.

Differences Across the Regions

Regional Differences Reflect Alaska's Diverse Landscapes and Ways of Life
While the sessions revealed significant common ground, they also highlighted the diversity of subsistence experiences, needs, and perspectives across Alaska. The concerns raised in each region reflect the resources people depend on, the geography they live in, the history of land and resource management in their communities, and the economic and regulatory pressures they face.

Arctic Slope and **Northwest Alaska** discussions placed particular emphasis on caribou, marine mammals, sea ice, hunting safety, shipping, and the Western Arctic Caribou Herd. Participants were especially concerned about changing environmental conditions, industrial and shipping activity, hunting restrictions, and the lack of a formal Tribal role in state subsistence management. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission was identified as an example of a stronger model of Tribal authority and enforcement.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and other river-based communities focused heavily on salmon and caribou declines, food security, commercial and industrial impacts, and the consequences of management decisions made outside the region. Participants described subsistence as essential to survival and community well-being and expressed some of the strongest calls for Tribal self-management and food sovereignty. Low voter participation and the need for greater collective political power were also particularly prominent concerns.

Bristol Bay and **Kodiak** reflected the importance and complexity of fisheries. Participants raised concerns about salmon declines, trawling, commercial and sport fishing, bycatch, ocean health, and the allocation of resources among competing users. At the same time, they emphasized that subsistence cannot be separated from the broader fishing economy and the health of the ecosystems that support both commercial and subsistence activities.

Interior discussions emphasized the interconnected effects of declining salmon and game populations, high fuel costs, land access, regulatory barriers, and the loss of fish camps and other places where knowledge is traditionally passed from one generation to the next. Participants also highlighted the importance of political engagement, legal literacy, and strengthening Native participation in regulatory processes.

Chugach and **Cook Inlet** highlighted challenges associated with development, population growth, pollution, and the displacement of communities from traditional harvesting areas. Participants also raised questions about how subsistence rights should apply to Alaska Natives living in urban or road-connected communities and called for approaches that recognize Alaska Native subsistence rights regardless of residence.

Differences Across the Regions

Southeast, the **Aleutians & Pribiloff Islands**, and **Chugach** communities brought a strong marine focus to the discussion, including concerns about salmon, halibut, herring, marine mammals, warming waters, harmful algal blooms, tourism, shipping, and outside access to local fishing areas. In **Chugach** communities, the continuing impacts of the Exxon Valdez oil spill remained an important part of the subsistence story, including concerns about ecosystem recovery, food safety, and trust in government data and environmental monitoring.

Copper River communities emphasized the relationship between subsistence, land ownership, federal land policy, and resource development. Participants raised concerns about land transfers, mineral development, declining salmon and caribou, commercial bycatch, and the absence of meaningful Tribal consultation. There was also a strong emphasis on political advocacy and the need for Tribes to exercise greater authority over their traditional lands and resources.

One Statewide Message, Many Regional Realities
The differences among the regions do not diminish the similarities. Instead, they demonstrate why a statewide subsistence strategy must be unified in its principles while flexible enough to respond to local conditions.

A community dependent on salmon faces different immediate challenges than a community dependent on caribou, marine mammals, waterfowl, or mixed resources. A coastal community experiencing erosion and changing sea conditions faces different risks than an Interior community dealing with wildfire, changing river systems, or declining game. Communities on the road system face different access pressures than communities dependent on boats, snowmachines, or aircraft. Yet participants across these different circumstances consistently returned to the same fundamental principles: protect the right to practice subsistence, protect the lands and waters that sustain it, respect Indigenous knowledge, reduce unnecessary barriers, and give Alaska Native communities meaningful authority in decisions affecting their resources and way of life.

The listening sessions therefore point toward a statewide approach that does not seek to make every community's experience the same. Instead, AFN's role can be to identify the common principles that unite Alaska Native communities while ensuring that regional knowledge and locally defined priorities remain central to implementation.

This distinction is important. Alaska's subsistence challenges are regional, but the call for greater self-determination, stewardship, access, and protection of Alaska Native ways of life is statewide.

Conclusion

The AFN Subsistence Listening Sessions provided an important opportunity to hear directly from Alaska Native communities about the realities, challenges, and aspirations surrounding subsistence. Across regions and communities, participants shared experiences that reinforced a central truth: subsistence is not simply about access to food. It is the foundation of cultural identity, community wellness, family relationships, spiritual connection, and the continuation of knowledge passed from one generation to the next.

The sessions also made clear that the challenges facing subsistence are complex and interconnected. Participants spoke about declining fish and wildlife populations, changing environmental conditions, increasing regulatory barriers, limitations within the current management system, and the growing difficulty of passing traditional practices on to younger generations. While these challenges differ by region, the underlying message was consistent: Alaska Native communities must have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their lands, waters, resources, and way of life.

Equally important, the listening sessions demonstrated the strength, knowledge, and determination of Alaska Native people. Communities offered practical solutions, shared regional expertise, and expressed a willingness to work together to protect subsistence for future generations. The conversations reinforced that meaningful progress will require collaboration among Tribes, regional and village corporations, Tribal consortia, state and federal partners, and organizations committed to upholding Alaska Native rights.

The conclusion of these listening sessions does not mark the conclusion of this work. Rather, it represents an important milestone in a larger effort to identify priorities, build partnerships, and develop meaningful strategies to advance Alaska Native subsistence rights. The feedback gathered through these sessions will help inform AFN's Subsistence Strategic Action Plan for 2026–2030 and guide continued advocacy, education, communications, legal strategy, and community engagement.

Moving forward, AFN is committed to carrying these voices into the next phase of this work. The recommendations and concerns shared by communities will continue to shape conversations about the future of subsistence management and the protection of Alaska Native ways of life.

There is much work ahead. Protecting subsistence will require sustained engagement, strong leadership, and collective action. Most importantly, it will require ensuring that Alaska Native people remain at the center of decisions about the resources, traditions, and lands that sustain our communities.

This round of listening sessions may be complete, but the work to protect subsistence—and the future of Alaska Native communities—is far from over.

Acknowledgements

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This report reflects a collective effort, and we are honored to carry these voices forward.

(l-r) Nikki Stoops, Jaeleen Kookesh, Gayla Hoseth, Angela Totemoff, and Ben Mallott in Copper Center.

(l-r) Nikki Stoops, Ben Mallott, Michelle Sparck, Jaeleen Kookesh, Kristina Andrew, Louie Green, Jr., and Gayla Hoseth in Dillingham.

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