



April 30, 2024

The Honorable Harriet Maxine Hageman
Chair, Subcommittee on Indian and
Insular Affairs
Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Teresa Isabel Leger Fernandez
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Indian
and Insular Affairs
Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 2687**

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, and Members of the Committee:

As Chairman of the Board of Chugach Alaska Corporation (Chugach), the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) Regional Corporation for the Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet, I would like to express my support for H.R. 2687. Chugach, along with many other ANCSA corporations and organizations, have supported this legislation since the late Rep. Don Young introduced the original version over four years ago. We are pleased and proud that Rep. Mary Peltola, with Rep. Pete Stauber as original cosponsor, have united to continue this essential and long overdue bipartisan effort to reform ANCSA in the manner prescribed by H.R. 2687.

As an Alaska Native Corporation (ANC), we serve the interests of the Alaska Native people of the Chugach region and represent more than 2,900 shareholders. Many of these shareholders continue to live a subsistence lifestyle in rural and remote villages in our region, where they endure harsh living conditions. Villages have limited access to the road system, while many are only accessible by air or boat, increasing costs for goods, services, and medical care. That's why many authoritative organizations and official agencies, including the U.S. Congress, U.S. Census Bureau, Indian Health Services, and the State of Alaska, recognize these Alaska Native residents as a vulnerable and disadvantaged population. Many of our people are among the poorest of the poor.

Building community is a core behavior engrained in our Alaska Native culture in order to survive these harsh conditions in rural Alaska, and this is especially true when it comes to taking care of our Elders and those who are disabled. Elders who live in these areas express the challenges they face in making decisions to pay for healthcare and basic necessities, such as glasses, dentures, or food. We have also heard from Elders asking to give their shares away and Settlement Trust benefits back in order to protect their Medicaid and Medicare benefits. Many do not have pensions or retirement accounts.

Village and Regional Corporations provide benefits and opportunities including dividend distributions, educational scholarships, cultural programs, internships, and Elder's benefits and distributions from Settlement Trusts, but Elders and our disabled population also rely on federal assistance programs for housing, nutrition assistance, Medicare, and Medicaid to support their communities. Since 1976, Section 29 of ANCSA (43 USC 1626) has excluded the first \$2,000 in ANC dividends when making determinations of eligibility for these programs. That \$2,000 exclusion has not been increased or even indexed for inflation since 1988.

Congress first authorized ANCs to establish settlement trusts in 1988 and since that time, many such Trusts have been established to provide for the long-term, multigenerational protection and growth of our Alaska Native Settlement Trusts for the benefit of our shareholders. However, Congress has never amended ANCSA to create an exclusion for benefits received by Alaska Natives from the settlement trusts authorized by ANCSA. This is ironic, because settlement trusts are one of the most powerful tools ANCs have to help Alaska Natives combat poverty, and the many ills that accompany it.

**TESTIMONY BY CHUGACH ALASKA CORPORATION IN
SUPPORT OF H.R. 2687
April 30, 2024
Page 2**

H.R. 2687 provides for a narrow but much-needed and important improvement in the treatment of distributions from the Trusts to the most vulnerable of our people, our Elders (and our blind and disabled Alaska Natives as well). Under H.R. 2687, distributions of Trust benefits to Alaska Native Elders (65 years or older) or to disabled Alaska Natives, will not count against those individuals for purposes of determining eligibility for governmental assistance programs. The legislation is critical because it prevents Elders and those who are disabled from losing eligibility for important, life-sustaining benefits such as housing assistance and food stamps, by virtue of a distribution of benefits to them from their Alaska Native Settlement Trust.

Our Elders and our disabled shareholders should not have to choose between healthcare and receiving a distribution that will allow them to pay their bills each month.

H.R. 2687 is very targeted to Alaska Natives who are Elders or disabled, and the bill does not provide a broad comprehensive exclusion of income from Settlement Trusts, for eligibility determination purposes, across the total population of Alaska Natives. While Chugach believes such an exclusion should ultimately be enacted, because ANCSA benefits should not compromise other benefits to which Alaska Natives are entitled by virtue of their being U.S. citizens or by virtue of being Native Americans, Chugach also recognizes it is critical to prioritize the needs of our Elders and disabled in the narrower manner prescribed by H.R. 2687. While the number of Elders and disabled individuals for whom H.R. 2687 will provide relief is small, and represents a low percentage of the overall Alaska Native population, thereby resulting, as we understand from CBO's analysis, in the budget "score" for the bill being very low, it is nevertheless extremely important to those Elders and disabled Natives who should not have to forgo their benefits from ANCSA in order to maintain federal assistance benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee and the Congress enact this bill as soon as possible.

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information or materials for the Committee as it considers this important piece of legislation.

Respectfully yours,



Sheri Burette

Chairman of the Board