Legislative Hearing on H.R. 10307, the *Anaktuvuk Pass Food Security Access Act*

Written Testimony of

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Good afternoon, Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernández, and members of the Subcommittee. Quyanaqpak, or "thank you very much" in Iñupiaq, for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 10307, the *Anaktuvuk Pass Food Security Access Act*. I also want to thank Representative Nick Begich for introducing this legislation and for his continued work to protect Anaktuvuk Pass' subsistence traditions and food security, as an Alaska Native community.

My name is Esther Hugo, and my Iñupiaq name is Suŋauraq. I am an Elder of Anaktuvuk Pass, I am here in my capacity as Vice President of the Naqsraġmiut Tribal Council. I currently and formerly have served in leadership roles in our city government, and in our local organization dedicated to protecting subsistence access, the United Caribou Association of the Nunamiut.

Collectively, the Alaska Native residents of Anaktuvuk Pass are known as the Nunamiut. For us as Nunamiut, protecting and preserving our Indigenous traditions is a calling shared across a variety of institutions that I have had the honor of serving over many years. With many of our Elders entering the twilight of their lives, we have limited time to preserve our subsistence traditions and pass them along to future generations. This legislation presents a unique and fleeting opportunity to do just that.

Today, our local leadership is organized in a quadrilateral structure that includes the City of Anaktuvuk Pass, the Naqsraġmiut Tribal Council, the Nunamiut Corporation, and the United Caribou Association of the Nunamiut. These four bodies represent our residents as a municipality, a Tribal government, an Alaska Native village corporation, and a community organization dedicated to the caribou (tuttu) and our Nunamiut traditions. Today, before this congressional subcommittee, we speak with one voice about our continued right to access our Indigenous land year-round for subsistence purposes.

Anaktuvuk Pass is one of eight communities on the North Slope of Alaska, a region larger than the State of Minnesota, yet not connected by a permanent road system, which makes the cost of living high and economic opportunity limited.

Anaktuvuk Pass is our region's only inland community and one of the few Alaska Native communities in our state not co-located with a navigable waterway. Our village sits on a divide between the Anaktuvuk and John Rivers in the central Brooks Range, about 250 miles northwest of Fairbanks as the crow flies. Our city's name means "the place of caribou droppings," and the village lies along an ancient migration route that has guided the caribou and the Nunamiut, who have depended on this mobile resource for centuries and still do today.

Today, Anaktuvuk Pass is home to around 400 residents, more than 84% of whom are Iñupiaq. We are connected to the outside world by scheduled and chartered flights to larger communities, and all of our cargo arrives by air.

However, our shared Nunamiut traditions remain the same. The caribou have not diminished in importance to our community. Our economy and culture is rooted in subsistence hunting of caribou, doll sheep, moose, and other land animals along with fishing and gathering. The fall hunt is one of the most important events of our year, during which our families dry caribou meat on racks to make paniqtaq. The food our hunters bring home is shared across Anaktuvuk Pass, and it sustains our community through the long Arctic winter. But with an aging Elder population, the longevity of these traditions is at risk.

It is the honor of a lifetime to represent the people of Anaktuvuk Pass. Yet, as a community Elder, I have personally witnessed and experienced throughout my life the various ways in which federal subsistence access restrictions have inhibited our food sovereignty and restricted our ability to pass hundreds, if not thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge and tradition to our future generations. My testimony today gives voice to this history and advocates for our future as Congress considers important legislation that will determine whether our children and grandchildren will be able to hunt, travel, and learn in our ancestors' homelands.

Importantly, Anaktuvuk Pass is the only community located within Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (the Park) that was created in 1980, a tract of federal land larger than the State of Vermont. Yet long before the park or even the federal government itself was created, the Nunamiut, stewarded these mountains and valleys for millennia.

H.R. 10307, the *Anaktuvuk Pass Food Security Access Act*, has the opportunity to resolve a challenge that our community has endured for 40 years. For most of that time, the residents of Anaktuvuk Pass were barred from using modern technologies like off-road vehicles (ORVs) and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) to reach the migrating caribou across most of our ancestral homelands. Over the past two years, the United States Department of the Interior (DOI) has taken a vital first step to correct this injustice and restore access. This legislation would make that year-round restoration of subsistence access permanent, restoring Alaska Native food security in Anaktuvuk Pass.

The Nunamiut: The Brooks Range's Ancestral Stewards

The Nunamiut, Iñupiaq for "the people of the land," are the inland Iñupiat of the central Brooks Range. For millennia, our ancestors lived as inland hunters, moving seasonally through the mountains and valleys in small, extended family groups. Unlike the coastal communities of the North Slope, whose subsistence traditions are tied to the ocean and the land, our way of life has always centered on the caribou. As they traversed our homelands, so did our people.

Qaunaqsriñiqput, or stewardship, is at the core of our traditions and defines our millennia-long relationship with essential subsistence resources. We have learned to use every part of the caribou to provide food, clothing, tools, and materials for shelter. Today, caribou remains the foundation of our identity, our local diet, and our local economy.

In the early 20th century, changes to the caribou herds, including shifts in their migration patterns and populations, forced many nomadic Nunamiut families to leave the Brooks Range. Many moved to the North Slope's coastal communities to survive.

But by the 1940s, the herds had returned, and a small group of Nunamiut families returned home to the Brooks Range. In 1949, these families began settling in the Anaktuvuk Valley, choosing a site that lay in the path of the caribou migration. Other families followed in subsequent years, and the once-nomadic Nunamiut began establishing a permanent settlement in the area.

Anaktuvuk Pass was incorporated as a city in 1957. While Anaktuvuk Pass is now a permanent settlement, our subsistence hunting traditions, which requires hunters to follow the caribou herds' movements across a vast landscape, remain central to our culture and the survival of our community. Our entire village may not follow the herds as it once did, but our hunters must.

The families who founded Anaktuvuk Pass did so by dogsled and motorized vehicles, including ATVs. Our valley had no navigable waterway or road, and it has neither today. Groceries, fuel, and building materials still reach us only by air. Those first families were fully dependent on what they could hunt, fish, and gather on our homelands. They relied on Indigenous knowledge of hunting routes, camps, and cultural practices passed down through generations, and, in turn, they passed that knowledge to the next generation in the only classroom in which to teach it: our ancestral homelands, in the Brooks Range.

Our history is preserved today at the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum in Anaktuvuk Pass. It displays traditional Nunamiut clothing, hunting tools, and household goods, and it tells the story of migrations into this region reaching back to the crossing of the Bering Land Bridge. It is a reminder that our presence in the Brooks Range did not begin with the purchase of Alaska, statehood, the creation of the Park, or any other act of Congress. Our connection to our homelands is ancient and strong.

The Nunamiut have always adapted our traditional subsistence techniques with modern technologies. Initially, we traveled by foot and dogsled to hunt the caribou before ORVs and ATVs reached our village in the 1950s with the arrival of the U.S. Geological Survey. Residents began using these tools regularly by the 1960s, and by 1980 there were dozens of ORVs and ATVs in Anaktuvuk Pass. These vehicles carried our hunters to the caribou and the bounties of their successful hunts home to our families.

Federal Intervention and Impacts on Anaktuvuk Pass

Shortly after the permanent settlement of Anaktuvuk Pass, Alaska officially became a state in 1959 and prompted the federal government to begin conveying lands to the newly minted State of Alaska. Statehood did not consider Alaska Native land claims, which led to a series of events by the Indigenous peoples of Alaska and culminated in a new approach by the federal government to Indigenous organization and delivery of services.

In 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was enacted into law. It extinguished aboriginal land claims in Alaska and created a system of Indigenous corporate land ownership rather than a reservation system. It did not resolve the future status of all federal lands in Alaska. My people, the North Slope Iñupiat, were the only ones who opposed the enactment of ANCSA.

Our people's voices have historically been ignored by Washington. When the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, the Alaska Native peoples who have stewarded these lands for thousands of years were absent from the negotiating table. When Alaska became a state in 1959, the Statehood Act conveyed to the new state more than 100 million acres of land that Alaska Native people had used and occupied for millennia. Our land rights and millennia-long connection to this land and their resources were overlooked and discarded by both federal and state governments.

In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) was enacted. The law established and expanded national parks, preserves, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and other conservation units throughout Alaska. It also addressed the fact that Alaska Native and rural communities already lived in and depended upon many of the affected landscapes. In many areas, land that residents had historically treated as a continuous hunting and subsistence landscape became a jurisdictional patchwork.

ANILCA also created Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, making Anaktuvuk Pass the only community located within the confines of the Park. At the stroke of a pen, our community became a virtual island, completely surrounded by the Park. The Nunamiut were not consulted during the policymaking process informing the law. It meant that no matter which way our hunters traveled from Anaktuvuk Pass, they would set foot on federal land and contend with a complex set of uninformed rules impinging on our ability to access lands we have used and stewarded for thousands of years.

Through ANILCA, Congress found that continued subsistence opportunity was essential to the physical, economic, traditional, and cultural existence of Native and other rural Alaska residents. Congress also recognized that, in many rural communities, practical alternatives to subsistence foods were unavailable and that subsistence was central to cultural identity, family relationships, and community life. Importantly, ANILCA established that rural residents should have the opportunity to continue subsistence uses of public lands, and that federal management should cause the least adverse impact possible on rural residents who depend on subsistence.

For many in the Lower 48, it is challenging to understand that American communities still rely on subsistence hunting for survival. Life in Anaktuvuk Pass – and the North Slope in general – is costly. Many goods purchased in our community are flown in, and a gallon of milk can cost nearly $20. Subsistence hunting remains a critical source of food for our families and is the reason the caribou continue to sustain our community and culture. We cannot reliably reach our subsistence resources without ATVs, ORVs, and snowmobiles, which the Nunamiut have used for nearly 70 years.

Despite the community being given verbal assurances by the National Park Service (NPS) that our ability to access our subsistence resources in the Park would not be impacted, in 1986, an NPS memorandum concluded that ATVs and ORVs are not considered a "traditional" means of access in the Park and prohibited our community from using them for subsistence.

Not only did the federal government trap our community within its new national park, it also confined our traditions to a single season – winter. With the 1986 memo, the federal government ignored decades of use of ATVs and ORVs by our residents.

Again, with the stroke of the pen, the federal government made a decision that has had detrimental impacts on generations of Nunamiut.

A Community United: A Generational Fight for Access

I am old enough to have seen the change in our community that followed the 1986 memorandum. After the 1986 memorandum, an invisible border divided our community from the lands that we depend on. During the summer months, we couldn't reach places where our ancestors had hunted for generations. The most painful consequences were diminished opportunities to teach our youth our hunting practices and pass Indigenous knowledge to the next generation.

Knowing where to travel, how to read the land, and how to hunt and process a caribou cannot be learned from a book. It is taught by doing, season after season, alongside parents, grandparents, and Elders. Each year that our young people could not travel with us in the summer and fall was a year that deprived the Nunamiut of our culture and could not be recovered. The federal government's actions robbed multiple generations of this birthright.

Anaktuvuk Pass understood the gravity of the memorandum, and, in the early 1990s, several local organizations partnered with regional entities to work with the NPS toward a solution. In 1992, the NPS Service signed a land exchange agreement with the City of Anaktuvuk Pass and the village and regional Alaska Native corporations to open a very limited amount of acreage near the community and within the park to ATV and ORV use for subsistence purposes. This agreement addressed the subsistence access issues geographically rather than comprehensively: certain lands were opened to ATV and ORV access, while the underlying memo against ATV use for subsistence access in the Park remained intact.

In 1996, Congress included that agreement in the *Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act.* The House Report Language included: "It is important to note that neither this agreement nor the accompanying Federal legislation will diminish, or otherwise affect in any way, anyone's rights and privileges to access public lands in Alaska for subsistence purposes."

That agreement was meaningful progress, and we are grateful to our Elders for their commitment to our people and our culture. But it was only a partial solution and didn't take into account that animals are kinetic resources, they move, and their migration patterns shift. If a herd passed outside of those areas, our hunters were barred from pursuing the caribou on their ATVs and ORVs.

For Anaktuvuk Pass, this issue of access is about survival.

Access Restored: Recent DOI Actions

In the spring of 2025, the NPS rescinded its 1986 memorandum and directed the superintendent of the Park to revisit the issue in consultation with Anaktuvuk Pass. This decision marked the first step toward correcting a historic wrong for the Nunamiut by restoring access to our subsistence resources and strengthening our food security. After nearly 40 years of living within the federal government's invisible barrier, our people could envision a future in which we could hunt without fear, provide for our community, and ensure that our Nunamiut traditions are passed down to future generations.

In May 2026, DOI issued a decision memo that concluded the 1986 memorandum's interpretation was inconsistent with historical and that ATVs and ORVs had in fact been used by Anaktuvuk Pass residents to access subsistence resources in the decades prior to the enactment of ANILCA, and that the federal government would recognize that ATV and ORV use for subsistence is a traditional means of access in the Park by the Nunamiut. The announcement directed the NPS to complete a new rulemaking process reflecting this guidance within the next six months.

This was a momentous occasion for our community. It restores our right to practice our subsistence traditions in our homelands throughout the year in accordance with the caribou's movements and to ensure these traditions are passed on to future generations.

Our residents have described how this gives them hope that our children will have food security, learn how to hunt, gather and process subsistence resources important to our identity.

Looking Ahead: The Importance of Durable Policy

We cannot plan our hunting seasons, teach our children, realize true food security, or invest in our future around a policy that may change every four to eight years. Anaktuvuk Pass needs policy certainty to ensure its future. Given Congress' role in drawing the boundaries of the Park, it is fitting that this body should write into law DOI's recognition that ATVs and ORVs are a traditional means of subsistence access for residents of Anaktuvuk Pass.

The *Anaktuvuk Pass Food Security Access Act* is a small change to one paragraph of federal law that will have a profound impact on our community by ensuring that our subsistence traditions are secure and that future generations may live on and learn from our ancestors.

In a community where store-bought food is flown hundreds of miles and priced accordingly, caribou is the most reliable food on our tables. Reliable access to our subsistence resources means that families can feed themselves, Elders can pass on traditional knowledge to our youth, and Anaktuvuk Pass is less dependent on store-bought food. Food security in our community begins and ends with the caribou, which is inextricably linked to access to our ancestral hunting lands within the Park.

The proposed legislation will codify a rule that applies only to Anaktuvuk Pass residents engaged in subsistence activities while excluding recreational use. Permanent recognition of our access in statute and responsible management of the park can and should go together.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our history and for engaging with our leadership about the struggle to protect our access to our subsistence resources. I submit this testimony for the record. Quyanaqpak.