

**Testimony Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of United States of America
regarding
H.R. 5153, THE INDIAN BUFFALO MANAGEMENT ACT**

**Washington DC
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Camai – Hello, Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, Congressman Young and other Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony with you today. My name is Melissa Berns and I am of Alutiiq decent from Kodiak Island in the Gulf of Alaska. I am a shareholder of the Old Harbor Native Corporation, established under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act for the Natives of Old Harbor, and currently sit on the Corporation’s Board of Directors. I am a member of the Alutiiq Tribe of Old Harbor, serving as their representative on the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council. I also serve as the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council Region 3 Regional Director representing Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Washington. Additionally, I serve on the Federal Subsistence Advisory Council for Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. I am also on the Old Harbor Alliance Board of Directors and the Kodiak Harvest Food Co-Op Board of Kodiak Island, among many other activities and capacities.

My journey with food security all began by growing up with a subsistence lifestyle in the Village of Old Harbor. As a family, we harvested from the land, air, and sea to fill our freezers and shelves, providing sustenance throughout the year. My family also gardened and raised poultry, adding additional nourishment to our diets that isn’t obtained through canned goods.

The Village of Old Harbor is very similar to most other rural Alaskan communities that are, like Old Harbor, only accessible by air or boat. Old Harbor is fortunate to have a store with limited canned and frozen goods, unlike the other five villages on Kodiak Island, but this comes at a high cost. The current price for a quart of shelf-stable boxed milk is \$5.50, a pound of butter is \$9.27, a pound of ground beef \$23.69, and a can of corn \$3.25. Fresh fruits and vegetables, rarely available, are a luxury we often do without. When harvesting subsistence fish and game by ATV or boat, residents pay for gasoline at a rate of \$7.14 per gallon. With the median household income

below \$25,000.00 it is reported that 24% of residents rely on the federally funded Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. For some residents who choose to shop from the only grocery store in the hub City of Kodiak, groceries are flown in at a rate of \$ 0.72 per pound. Any way you look at it, the cost of living is high and the goods coming in are mediocre, but we love our home and are doing what we can to provide for our families.

The distance from Alaska to the continental United States complicates access to food and other goods for all Alaskans. The Alaska Food Policy Council (AFPC), which spearheads the understanding and analysis of Alaska's food system, estimates 95% of our commercial food within the state of Alaska is imported while subsistence and personal use harvests, other vital sources of nutrition, are estimated at a worth of \$900 million annually. Yet shockingly, one in five Alaskan kids face chronic hunger. The Council encourages collaboration among Alaskan farmers, fisheries, state institutions and agencies, tribal entities, and consumers to create a healthier, more secure, and more self-reliant Alaska by improving our food system.

The Village of Old Harbor has a dynamic and productive working relationship between the Alutiiq Tribe of Old Harbor, the City of Old Harbor and the Old Harbor Native Corporation. These three entities work together for the betterment of our community and people. In 2015, leadership from these entities created the not-for-profit corporation, Old Harbor Alliance. The Alliance Board has representation from all three governing bodies in addition to elders and youth from the community. Our mission is to bring our people together to build a healthy community of strong leaders for all generations. Since inception, the Old Harbor Alliance has focused on programs for youth and elders including culture camps that share traditional harvesting and processing practices, programs that cultivate produce for our elders, and, more recently, management of a buffalo herd.

Over the past two decades, members of our tribe would purchase buffalo hunts and travel 30 miles north to harvest from a private buffalo herd. The meat would be shared among family members and in years of hardship, when the salmon weren't as plentiful or deer populations were low, this food source was a vital part of sustenance for our families. Due to financial constraints and logistics this method of harvesting buffalo was not an option for most families. In 2015, our vision of having a secure food source for our membership, by owning a buffalo herd ourselves, was achieved when a private herd came up for sale. In 2016 we joined the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council, through which we were able to obtain technical support to help establish a herd, and in 2017 we

were successful in rounding up and relocating the herd of 43 head to Old Harbor Native Corporation Land.

The goal for establishing the herd is to provide a sustainable, healthy, nutritional food source for tribal and community members to support our community in the fight against diabetes and other dietary diseases that affect native people. Buffalo meat contains 40% more protein than beef; it is a rich source of lean protein and provides omega-3 fatty acids beneficial to heart health, boosting brain function, enhancing eyesight, improving bone health, and optimizing skin health. Research suggests these Omega-3 fatty acids may prevent ADHD in children as well as help fight cancer. Bison meat is high in energizing B vitamins supporting brain function and the nervous system. It contains selenium, which is an antioxidant and fights inflammation, and zinc, supporting a strong immune system; it is a source of conjugated linoleic acid beneficial in weight loss and increasing lean body mass; and contains more iron per serving compared to beef, chicken or pork. The American Heart Association now recommends eating buffalo meat as part of a heart healthy diet.

In addition to the many health and nutritional benefits, there are deep-rooted cultural and spiritual benefits of buffalo to Native people. Buffalo are known to possess many powers that benefit the mind, body and spirit of those who honor and respect it. I have personally been moved by the buffalo in a way that is indescribable; this feeling is shared by those who have been able to work with the animals and exposed to their grandeur.

Our management plan includes 3 tiers of hunts to ensure maximum benefit to our membership. Tier 1 - Cultural Hunts: Allow for the designation of hunters to harvest, process, and distribute meat to elders and families in need. Tier 2 – Lottery Hunts: Allow for individual members to sign up for harvesting which must benefit a minimum of two households. This supports our historical cultural and traditional ways of harvesting in groups and sharing the bounty. And lastly, Tier 3 – Commercial Hunts: which allow for the sale of buffalo hunts to generate funds for our herd management, elders and youth programs.

Our herd is just one in Alaska owned by a tribe or Alaska Native Corporation, we all share the same goal of providing for our people. The Indian Buffalo Management Act would benefit us as we work to develop and grow herds and providing a secure, healthier food source for our people. H.R. 5153's creation of a Buffalo Resource Management Program at the Department of Interior along with authorization for grant funding of \$14,000,000 per year, to be implemented and utilized

in consultation with Tribes and Native Corporations, will have a tremendously positive impact on Native American communities and their undeniable bond to these magnificent animals. We respectfully urge the Congress to move this legislation forward to enactment as soon as possible. I thank the Committee, and the Legislation's Sponsor, Congressman Don Young, for the opportunity to testify here today.