During the week of September 19-26, a delegation of St. Lawrence Island Yupik tribal and community leaders, youth and elders from the Arctic/Bering Sea villages of Savoonga and Gambell on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska are in Washington D.C. They are here to share information about their history, culture, and the importance of their traditional diet of foods from the land and ocean for physical and spiritual sustenance. St. Lawrence Island is located in the northern Bering Sea off the northwest coast of Alaska. Alaska Community Action on Toxics has facilitated community-based environmental health research (through support from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)) demonstrating the nature and extent of contamination, as well as documenting adverse health outcomes that may be linked with the military contamination on the Island and industrial contamination of the Arctic from long-range sources.

The people of St. Lawrence Island have been harmed and displaced by contamination from former military bases. The military disposed of toxic waste on the Island, including massive amounts of fuels, solvents, PCBs, pesticides, and heavy metals. The contamination from the military sites continues to adversely affect the health and well-being of the people. In addition, the Arctic has become a hemispheric sink for persistent chemicals that travel hundreds of miles into the region and accumulate in the bodies of wildlife and people.

Given its strategic importance to the U.S. military during World War II and into present times, Alaska now has 700 formerly used defense sites (FUDS)—two of the most contaminated are located on St. Lawrence Island. The village of Gambell was used as a base for the military beginning in 1948. Hazardous wastes, military debris, unexploded ordnance, and spills are located in the soils and groundwater beneath the village. The vulnerability of the drinking water source in Gambell is heightening due to increasing storm surges that accompany rapid climate warming. Northeast Cape is a former U.S. Air Force Base and was also used as a White Alice Site, an important military communications site established during the Cold War. Northeast Cape is a traditional food gathering and hunting camp for the residents of Savoonga. Prior to the military occupation, there was a village at Northeast Cape that was displaced. At Northeast Cape, the military dumped PCBs, pesticides, solvents, heavy metals, asbestos, and hundreds of gallons of fuels.

In a letter dated April 7, 1951, the Savoonga Tribal Council granted the United States Air Force a land withdrawal for military use at Northeast Cape with clear conditions, including the following provision:

“Any refuse or garbage will not be dumped in streams or near the beach within the proposed area as this will prove detrimental to the seal breeding grounds.”

The U.S. Air Force and the Army Corps of Engineers have violated this agreement, causing and perpetuating extensive hazardous contamination. As the current governing entity, the Tribe reiterates
Annie Alowa, respected elder and former community health aide stands among debris at the formerly used defense site at Northeast Cape on St. Lawrence Island.

People of St. Lawrence Island have levels of PCBs in their blood serum that are 6-9 times higher than the average levels in people living in the continental United States due to global transport, with discernibly higher PCB levels among the people who lived or worked at the military base at Northeast Cape. Annie Alowa, a respected elder and community health aide from the village of Savoonga, had raised concerns about adverse health effects that she associated with the contamination from the military site at Northeast Cape, including cancers, miscarriages, low-birth weight, and other reproductive health problems. Cancer deaths among the people of St. Lawrence Island are nearly ten times higher than the rate of cancer deaths in the general population in Alaska. Community health researchers on the island have documented health outcomes of concern including cancers, thyroid disease, learning and developmental problems, diabetes, heart disease, and reproductive health problems.

As stated by Dr. David Carpenter, Director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany: “The evidence that there are health hazards from exposures to PCBs in the range of 6-9 ppb is very strong, with disease outcomes ranging from cancer to neurobehavioral effects to endocrine disruption and immune suppression.”

The delegation from St. Lawrence Island and Alaska Community Action on Toxics calls upon policy makers in Washington DC to hold the military and chemical industry accountable for violations of human rights. They urge policy makers to assist in their community-based research and advocacy efforts to protect lands, water, and the health of present and future generations.
Contamination problems are exacerbated by rapid climate warming in the Arctic because of enhanced mobilization and transport of contaminants from local and distant sources. Temperatures in the Arctic are warming 5-10 times faster than elsewhere in the world. Scientists forecast that the Arctic Ocean will be ice-free by 2040, with profound effects on ice-dependent species such as polar bear, walrus, spotted seal, ringed seal, bearded seal, and ribbon seal. Climate warming of the Arctic threatens coastal communities and their means of subsistence. Some communities along the Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea are already preparing for re-location. Increasing storm surges, melting permafrost, and sea ice disappearance are among the most dramatic effects of climate warming in the Arctic. These outcomes of climate warming also cause more rapid dispersal of contaminants into freshwater and marine environments, thus more directly affecting the health of fish and marine mammals that serve as the primary traditional foods for northern Indigenous peoples. Atmospheric loading of contaminants to the ocean surface is increased as sea ice retreats.

The delegation respectfully requests the following actions:

- Ensure proper funding for the responsible cleanup of formerly used defense sites, including provisions for use of innovative clean-up technologies relevant to the Arctic, regulatory oversight and enforcement, government-to-government consultation with Tribes, and citizen participation and oversight. Tribes, as sovereign governments, must have the right to determine clean-up standards and be official parties to the Records of Decision.
- Achieve complete restoration and removal of the contamination rather than premature closures, partial excavations, natural attenuation, and/or land use controls.
- Take actions to address and prevent further health and environmental effects of military contamination on St. Lawrence Island and the Yupik people who rely on traditional foods from the land and sea.
- Protect the health of children and other vulnerable populations in Alaska and elsewhere through reform of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) and the federal pesticide law (FIFRA). Include provisions to: 1) phase out persistent, bioaccumulative, and chemicals that harm health; 2) require safe substitutes and solutions; 3) give the public and workers the full right-to-know and participate; and 4) require prior, comprehensive safety data for all chemicals.
- Take swift, bold measures to substantially reduce greenhouse gases to protect communities of the Arctic from climate change impacts.
- U.S. participation and leadership is critical to the success of international efforts to eliminate the world’s most dangerous substances that threaten the north/Arctic. Ensure passage of strong, effective implementation legislation for the ratification of the Stockholm Convention, the international, legally-binding treaty on POPs.

Levels of PCBs in the blood of St. Lawrence Island Yupik people are 6-9 times higher than the average in the continental United States populations (indicated by the red line).