Alaska Community Action on Toxics

Environmental Health and Justice for Sivuqaq

Alaska Sivuqaq Yupik Delegation

Statement of Purpose

March 2025

NATIVE VILLAGE OF GAMBELL

ACAT
Alaska Community Action on Toxics

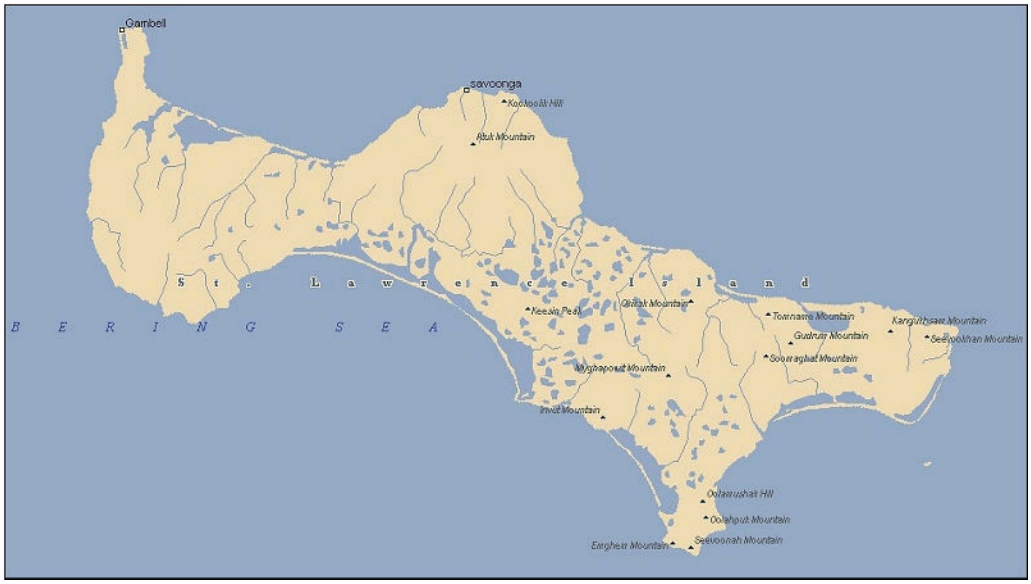
NATIVE VILLAGE OF SAVOONGA

During the week of March 10-14, 2025, a delegation of Sivuqaq (also known as St. Lawrence Island) Yupik tribal and community leaders, youth, and elders from Savoonga and Gambell on Sivuqaq Alaska are in Washington D.C. We are here to share information about our history, culture, way of life, and the importance of our traditional foods. Our traditional foods from the land and ocean are essential for our physical, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. We are here to share information and community-based research concerning the long-term harm caused by the U.S. military from two formerly used defense sites (FUDS) on our Island.

The Island of Sivuqaq is located in the northern Bering Sea off the northwest coast of Alaska. Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT) has partnered with Native Village of Gambell and Native Village of Savoonga for twenty five years and has facilitated community-based environmental health research, through support from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, to document the nature and extent of contamination, as well as adverse health outcomes associated with military contamination on the Island from FUDS as well as industrial contamination of the Arctic from long-range sources.

Our Yupik People of Sivuqaq have been harmed and displaced by contamination from the former military bases. The military abandoned and disposed of toxic waste on our Island, including massive quantities of fuels, solvents, PCBs, pesticides, and heavy metals. The contamination from the military sites continues to harm the health and well-being of our people. In addition, the Arctic has become a hemispheric sink for persistent chemicals and microplastics that travel hundreds of miles into the region and accumulate in the bodies of fish, wildlife, and people. These are burdens and harms that we did not create.

Given its strategic importance to the U.S. military during World War II and into present times, Alaska has approximately seven hundred current and FUDS. Two of the most contaminated FUDS are located on Sivuqaq. The community of Gambell was used as a base for the military beginning in 1948. Hazardous waste, debris, unexploded ordnance, and spills pollute the soil, groundwater beneath the community, and adjacent Troutman Lake. The vulnerability of the drinking water source in Gambell is intensifying due to increasing storm surges and melting permafrost that accompany rapid climate warming. Northeast Cape is the location of 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. The military displaced the Native Village of Northeast Cape, a community of about 130 people. Northeast Cape has always been an important traditional food-gathering and hunting location for the people of Sivuqaq. At Northeast Cape, the military dumped PCBs, pesticides, solvents, heavy metals, asbestos, and hundreds of thousands of gallons of fuel. PCB levels are more elevated among the people most closely associated with Northeast Cape. Diseases such as cancer, as well as neurodevelopmental, endocrine, and reproductive disorders, are more prevalent among the Northeast Cape families.



Sivuqaq is located in the northern Bering Sea in northwestern Alaska. It has two formerly used defense sites: Gambell and Northeast Cape.

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 Army Corps of Engineers have violated this agreement, causing and perpetuating extensive hazardous contamination. As the governing entity, the Tribe reiterates authority to establish the highest standards that require restoration of the lands and waters adversely affected by military activities at Northeast Cape. Sivuqaq residents intend to re-establish the village at Northeast Cape but must ensure the health and safety of the lands, waters, and traditional food sources prior to relocation.

The military installed and later abandoned major facilities at Northeast Cape and Gambell with little or no consideration of the impact of their operations on the environment and health of the people of Sivuqaq. The toxic contaminants were left uncontained by the U.S. Department of Defense at the sites and continue to be released into the environment. The hazardous chemicals dumped by the U.S. military on Sivuqaq, as well as the contaminants carried into the Arctic through long-range transport, constitute cumulative risks that threaten traditional fishing, hunting, and food-gathering areas and means of our survival, economic, social, and cultural development for the people and future generations.

"Arctic Indigenous Peoples are suffering some of the highest exposures to toxic chemicals from military and long-range industrial sources," states Vi Waghiyi, a Yupik grandmother from Sivuqaq. "We continue to be harmed by the military contamination on our Island and the accumulation of toxic chemicals in the Arctic." Chemicals concentrating in the Arctic from long-range transport include pesticides such as chlorpyrifos, industrial flame-retardant chemicals, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS "forever chemicals"), among others. These chemicals are highly persistent and are carried north on atmospheric and oceanic currents from more southerly latitudes where they are manufactured, used, and disposed of. "These chemicals are contaminating our traditional foods and affecting our health and the health of our children and future generations," Waghiyi further stated.

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.

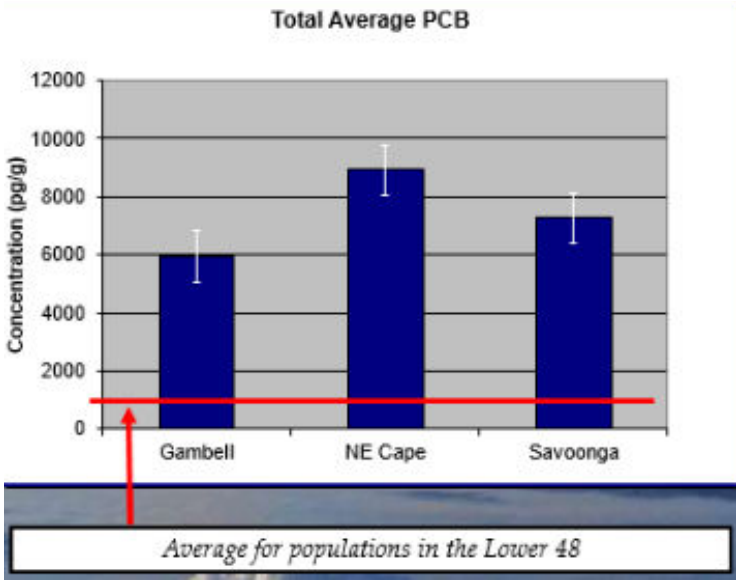
Our team's research has shown that the Yupik People of Sivuqaq have elevated levels of PCBs in blood serum that are 6-9 times higher than the average levels of people living in the contiguous United States due to global transport of PCBs into the Arctic, with discernibly higher PCB levels among the people who lived or worked at the military base at Northeast Cape, including cancers, thyroid diseases, miscarriages, low-birth weight babies, and other reproductive health problems.

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 for 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 Sivuqaq delegation and ACAT call upon policymakers in Washington, D.C. 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 four times faster than elsewhere in the world. Scientists forecast the disappearance of summer sea ice as early as 2035, thus making coastal communities more vulnerable to storm events and erosion, with profound effects on ice-dependent species such as polar bears, walruses, spotted seals, ringed seals, bearded seals, and ribbon seals.



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

The rapid climate warming of the Arctic threatens coastal communities, our ways of life, and food security. Some communities along the Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea have already been forced to relocate. Increasing storm surges, melting permafrost, and the disappearance of sea ice are among the Arctic's most dramatic effects of climate warming. These outcomes of climate warming also cause more rapid dispersal of contaminants into freshwater and marine environments, thus 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:

1

Re-open the Records of Decision and work to ensure health-protective clean up. Tribes, as sovereign governments, must have the right to determine the adequacy of site characterization and clean-up standards and to ensure state and federal agency accountability. Tribes must be included as official parties to the Records of Decision. In partnership with the Tribes, agencies must ensure adequate funding to achieve complete restoration rather than premature closures, partial excavations, natural attenuation, and/or land use controls. The process of clean up and restoration must include proper regulatory oversight and enforcement, government-to-government consultation with Tribes, and citizen participation and oversight. The restoration process should include provisions for using innovative clean-up technologies relevant to the Arctic (such as in situ bioremediation and chemical oxidation).

2

The U.S. Government should honor its 1951 agreement with the Sivuqaq Yupik leadership that prohibited the despoiling of Sivuqaq by waste dumping and ensure the full rehabilitation of Sivuqaq land and resources. The Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), in developing a plan for further FUDS cleanup proven in the Arctic, must consider all scientific evidence developed by ACAT and research partners and/or other investigators concerning continuing Sivuqaq contamination and its health impacts on residents. ACE must consider and mitigate the potential impacts that climate change and sea-level rise may have on any remedies selected to assure that any contaminants remaining after additional cleanup cannot be mobilized, including the removal of unlined landfills (e.g., because of melting of permafrost) and create a risk of future toxic exposures.

3

The U.S. Government must conduct a comprehensive health study of the impacts of military pollution on Sivuqaq residents, including health screenings, in order to prevent further health harms. The U.S. government must fund and conduct independent, comprehensive, and scientifically rigorous health studies of Sivuqaq residents' illnesses that may be traceable to exposure to military wastes abandoned on the island. A whole government approach to provide screenings, proper diagnosis and treatment of environmental health effects, on-going health care for the at-risk community and future generations. Collaborate with the Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service, and other health care experts in the nation, including Mayo Clinic, to treat illness and health disparities linked to legacy military toxic exposures. The U.S. government must provide health care to all former and current residents of Sivuqaq to address the negative health consequences of their exposure to military wastes to date.

4

The U.S. Government must ensure that residents of the Northeast Cape (NEC), currently displaced in Savoonga, can return to NEC and restore a thriving year-round community. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, EPA, and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) must recognize that former residents/families of the NEC seek to return and rebuild the community that has been and continues to be displaced due to informed knowledge gained from their community-based participatory research and fear of exposure to unremedied toxic hazards abandoned at NEC and buried at Gambell. ACE must remediate the NEC FUD sufficiently to meet the health risk standard protective for unrestricted, full-time residential use of the site.

5

The U.S. EPA must add the Sivuqaq FUDS to the National Priorities List (NPL). The U.S. Government must add the Sivuqaq FUDS to the NPL ("Superfund"), as they meet the criteria qualifying them for inclusion. EPA should list the Sivuqaq FUDS on the NPL to assure the remedies are and remain protective in the future.

6

All Government agencies should provide information and promote transparency regarding remediation decisions on Sivuqaq. U.S. EPA, ACE, and ADEC must affirmatively provide to the public all data necessary to explain the rationale for future cleanup decisions without requiring Sivuqaq residents to make formal public records requests. U.S. EPA, ACE, and ADEC must hold regular meetings with Tribes, Tribal governments, Native corporations, local governments, Sivuqaq residents, and other interested parties to discuss further testing and remediation plans and to accept and respond to public comments.

7

The U.S. Government should formally apologize for the harm and human rights violations it has inflicted on the Sivuqaq Yupik People. The government must take responsibility for silencing Yupik voices during cleanup decision-making to date. It must also apologize and commit to full public participation in future cleanup planning and decision-making, including the Sivuqaq Yupik Tribes, their members, and affected non-Yupik parties.

8

The U.S. Government must protect the health of children, other vulnerable populations of Sivuqaq and the Arctic, and future generations through reform of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), the federal pesticide law (FIFRA), and international agreements including the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the new international treaty on plastics. Protective measures must include: 1) elimination of persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic chemicals that harm the environment, wildlife, and public health; 2) requirement for safe substitutes and solutions; 3) requirement for transparency and comprehensive health and safety data for all chemicals and chemicals in products prior to approval for manufacturing.

9

The U.S. Government should take swift, bold measures to substantially reduce fossil fuel production, chemicals and plastics manufacturing, and associated greenhouse gas emissions to protect communities of the Arctic from further harm associated with climate warming.

10

The U.S. Government should ensure passage of strong, effective implementation legislation for the ratification of the Stockholm Convention, the international, legally binding treaty on persistent organic pollutants (POPs). U.S. participation and leadership are critical to the success of international efforts to eliminate the world's most dangerous substances that threaten the North/Arctic.

For more information and further recommendations, please see our peer-reviewed scientific publications and new report, *The Arctic's Plastic Crisis: Toxic Threats to Health, Human Rights, and Indigenous Lands From the Petrochemical Industry,* at **www.akaction.org**.