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**PANEL CONSISTING OF JONATHON SOLOMON, FORT YUKON, AK;
GLADYS NETRO, OLD CROW VILLAGE, YUKON TERRITORY;
AND KAY WALLIS, ARCTIC VILLAGE AK**

Mr. SOLOMON. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am Jonathon Solomon from Fort Yukon, Alaska. With me today are Kay Wallis, also of Fort Yukon, and Gladys Netro of Old Crow, Yukon Territory in Canada.

Thank you, Chairman Miller, for your invitation to the Gwich'in people to testify here today. We are honored to be here to speak for our people.

This is a historic time for the Gwich'in Athabascan Indians of northeast Alaska and northwest Canada, a turning point in our history. Something is happening. You can feel it when you walk down the streets of our villages. Everywhere you go there is a growing knowledge that we can and must make a better world for ourselves and for our future generations.

Last January, leaders from each of our communities met together in Ft. Yukon. They decided to call a rare gathering of all our people together, the Gwich'in Niintsyaa. The last gathering like this took place sometime last century. They are called at times of extreme importance or danger when the entire nation must be consulted.

The gathering, Gwich'in Niintsyaa, took place in Arctic Village June 5-10, 1988. For a whole week we listened to the advice of our elders and others, everyone speaking our own language.

The gathering was to address a single question: What must we do to ensure our culture and traditional values remain a real option for our future generations?

Our leaders spoke with a single voice. We were told to do three things to preserve our culture: (1) free ourselves from alcoholism, (2) improve the education of our children, and (3) protect the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd.

Our people and our Gwich'in culture have lived in this region for thousands of years. Before that our first ancestors were living here for who knows how many more thousands of years.

For all those hundreds and hundreds of generations we have been nomadic hunters, and we continue to be hunters to this day. Ours is a rich land and our people lived well most of the time. Our people rise and fall with the caribou. I was told of times when the smoke of the fires rose like the quills on a porcupine, there were so many camps in the hills.

Later disease killed many of our people, around 1920 I think, and the caribou died off at about that time as well. This is the belief and the history of our people; that our future and the future of the porcupine caribou are the same. Now the caribou and our people are both coming back again. In every village you will see many children now, and others who left for the cities and other places are returning to the villages now too.

Today there are about 8-10,000 Gwich'in. We mostly live in and around 16 communities in our homeland: Arctic Village, Venetie, Ft. Yukon, Beaver, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Circle, Eagle Village and Salmon Village in Alaska; and Old Crow, Ft. McPherson, Arctic Red River, Dawson, Mayo, Aklavik and Inuvik in Canada. Fairbanks and Whitehorse are the nearest cities and many people live there as well.

Please understand, we are a modern hunting culture—one of only a few left in the modern world. Our people are caribou people. Caribou provides not only food and materials for our people, but also our spiritual life. For many, the traditional life is the only alternative to alcohol and the streets. Without caribou, who are we? What do we have to offer our children?

I have been coming to this town and traveling for my people for more than 20 years now, and I still get sick if I do not bring dry meat or dry fish with me. We just cannot get by on the food here. It is a small thing, but it's an example of what I'm talking about. It's the same for our people when they go into the hospital. We always bring them native foods. If we do not, often they just get worse and die.

The issue is not just the caribou either. All the land and animals here are important and respected by our people. It is our back yard and we feel about it just like you do about yours. More so, because we cannot move to another place to live our lives. They are all connected with this land right here; where our parents and grandparents and their grandparents have all lived and are buried.

At the end of the Niintsyaa we passed a resolution which calls for the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd be protected as Wilderness. I hope you will give serious consideration to this resolution and take action to allow our people to continue their culture.

Congress has the power, but no-one has the right to deny the Gwich'in our own means of subsistence. This principle is clearly stated in the International Human Rights Covenants, and is recognized by civilized nations everywhere. Make no mistake, this is our life at stake here—the life of a modern hunting culture that is alive and healthy and growing.

We are determined to take responsibility for our future. We are winning our fight with alcohol. We have kept our language and customs and values. We will overcome our dependency on Government aid. Our communities are strong and growing. We are united and positive about our future, but we need our help. In the name of all our people we ask you to vote to make the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness.

I want to say one more thing about wilderness. For this area you should make clear that subsistence activities are to be protected. You define wilderness as a place where people are visitors. I'm sure this area seems this way to you, but to us this whole region is occupied already. Where you see empty land I see a hundred camps still used by our people. Where you see a faraway reserve, we see our back yard. This should not really be a problem, but we recommend that you restate the subsistence priority and list cultural preservation as a purpose of the refuge.

Finally, I would like to read the resolution of our people. This is a resolution that was passed by our people in June 10 in Arctic Village.

For thousands of years our ancestors, the Gwich'in Athabascan Indians of northeast Alaska and northwest Canada, have relied on caribou for subsistence, and continue today to subsist on the Porcupine caribou herd which is essential to meet the nutritional, cultural and spiritual needs of our people; and the Gwich'in have the inherent right to continue our own way of life; and that this right is recognized and affirmed by civilized nations in the International Covenants on Human Rights. Article I of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights read in part;

"In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence;" and

The health and productivity of the Porcupine Caribou herd, and their availability to Gwich'in communities, and the very future of our people are endangered by proposed oil and gas exploration and development in the calving and post-calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Coastal Plain; and the entire Gwich'in Nation was called together by our chiefs in Arctic Village June 5-10 to carefully address this issue and to seek the advice of our elders; and the Gwich'in people of every community from Arctic Village, Venetie, Fort Yukon, Beaver, Chalkyitsik, Birch Creek, Stevens Village, Circle, and Eagle Village in Alaska; from Old Crow, Fort McPherson, Arctic Red River, Aklavik and Inuvik in Canada have reached consensus in our traditional way, and now speak with a single voice.

Now therefore be it resolved that the U.S. Congress and President recognize the rights of our Gwich'in people to continue to live our way of life by prohibiting development in the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd; and be further resolved that the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge be made wilderness to achieve this end.

I want to thank you for inviting us back to testify on this issue which means everything to our people.

[Prepared statement of Mr. Solomon, with attachment, follows:]