

Alaska Delegation Bill Works to Protect Alaska Native Whaling Quota

WASHINGTON, DC – The Alaska Congressional Delegation recently introduced bipartisan, bicameral legislation to authorize the Secretary of Commerce to preserve the bowhead whale subsistence harvest and Alaska Native food security under U.S. law if the International Whaling Commission (IWC) fails to act on bowhead whale quota during their September 2018 meeting in Florianopolis, Brazil. The legislation – [*the Whaling Convention Amendments Act of 2018*](#) – is led by Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Chairman of the Oceans, Atmosphere, Science and Coast Guard Subcommittee, and cosponsored by Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI). Alaska Congressman Don Young has sponsored companion legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

“Subsistence whaling is critical to the food security and cultural fabric of Alaska’s North Slope and Bering Strait communities,” **said Senator Sullivan**. “Captains of the various whaling crews in our villages are revered community leaders, apprenticing for decades before earning the honor of leading a crew. Marrying the modern and traditional worlds in hunts, these whaling crews go to great lengths to put traditional food on the table and to keep their culture alive. The Whaling Convention Amendments Act of 2018 will allow the Secretary of Commerce to act on behalf of Alaska Native communities only if the IWC fails to act on U.S. bowhead quota, ensuring this way of life continues.”

“The whale has sustained a people, and a culture in Alaska for centuries. Whaling crews share their bounty, providing food security for entire communities. Preserving the right for bowhead whale subsistence harvests is not just about physical sustenance or food security. This is an integral part of who many indigenous Alaskans are as people,” **said Senator Murkowski**. “Through my role as an appropriator, I have worked to support, with directed funding, the study of bowhead whale health for efficient and humane subsistence harvest ahead of upcoming International Whaling Commission meetings. It’s imperative that we ensure this way of life for Alaska Native communities continues.”

“This bill is a safeguard for Alaska Natives, many of whom rely on subsistence whaling, and it protects their way of life,” **said Congressman Young**. “The IWC has 87 countries divided almost evenly between whaling and non-whaling countries. This often leads to votes and decisions that are based on the politics of appeasing groups that do not understand subsistence rather than on science. The right of Alaska Natives to hunt marine mammals has been recognized by the IWC, but subsistence whaling has been caught up in such a political fight. For those Alaska Native communities that practice subsistence whaling, this is an integral part of their culture, heritage, and well-being and it must be defended.”

Background:

On October 31, 2017, Senator Sullivan chaired an [Oceans, Atmosphere, Science and Coast Guard Subcommittee hearing](#) entitled “Exploring Native American Subsistence Rights and International Treaties.”

In June 2016, Senator Sullivan [gave a speech](#) on the Senate floor about Alaska’s unique whaling culture.

Worldwide whale stocks are managed through the International Whaling Commission, a group of 88 countries that have ratified the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. The Whaling Convention Act of 1949 is the relevant U.S. implementing legislation.

The Convention allows for the harvest of certain whale species for nations that certify either a cultural or subsistence need for their aboriginal population. Russia, Denmark (for Greenland), the United States, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines are those nations who currently practice Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW).

From time-to-time, the Commission renews ASW quota. However, due to increased polarization at the IWC due to unrelated disputes regarding commercial and scientific whaling, in recent years, ASW communities have seen their quota used as a bargaining chip or outright rejected—all despite no objection by the IWC’s Scientific Committee

The aboriginal subsistence harvest in Alaska is sustainable, and non-commercial. The number of bowheads is consistently increasing and may now be at levels not seen since the dawn of the 20th Century. The International Whaling Commission has consistently certified that the biological status of our bowheads is sustainable.

###