

OPENING REMARKS OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

ECONOMIC STIMULUS HEARING

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WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. Chairman, I find it ironic, tragically ironic, that it takes an economic downturn in the rest of the country for this Congress to consider an economic stimulus for Indian Country.

Most people do not realize is that what our country as a whole has been seeing for the past year or so is nothing compared to the economic conditions that have been prevailing in many of our Native communities for over 100 years.

The Wade-Hampton Census District in the Yukon Kuskokwim region of Alaska consists of about fifteen Yupik Eskimo villages. Nearly 93 percent of the population in that census district is Alaska Native. It is one of the poorest census areas, based on per capita income, anywhere in the United States. It is the poorest in Alaska.

One of the Yupik villages in the Wade-Hampton census district is Emmonak. Emmonak is home to about 800 people.

Emmonak is today suffering a food crisis due to an unfortunate chain of events that demonstrate to all of us just how vulnerable our Indian communities are

The village expects to get most of its winter food from subsistence fishing, but the fishing was bad last summer. The village receives its delivery of winter diesel during the summer because that is when the fuel barge can get in. So Emmonak bought its winter fuel at the record high prices that prevailed last summer. The only problem is that the fuel barge didn't get in because of early ice on the river. So now, Emmonak has to pay for to fly the fuel in from an Alaska population center. Winter came early to Emmonak this year so the cost of heat has been astronomical.

This week, the people of Emmonak are crying out to the world for help. Heating fuel costs \$7.83 a gallon. The people of Emmonak now find themselves in another crisis. They've paid

the high cost of fuel and now they have no money to purchase food. Food or heat. That is the choice they've been facing.

I ask unanimous consent that a Letter to the Editor of the Bristol Bay Times written by Nicholas Tucker, Sr. describing Emmonak's predicament in some detail be placed in the record. My staff in Alaska tells me that Emmonak is not the only Alaska Native village facing this predicament.

Last year, Congress nearly doubled the funding for the LIHEAP program and added substantial funding to the weatherization program. Yet even with this additional funding, there remains a tremendous gap between assistance and needs.

For much of this winter, Emmonak and other Alaska Native communities were eagerly a donation of subsidized fuel from Hugo Chavez and CITGO. It was on, then it was off, now the newspapers say it is on again.

Some villages have turned down these donations out of principle. For others, it is all donations gratefully accepted because there are simply no other alternatives. But it is truly tragic that Alaska Native villages must depend on Venezuela for

their safety net. Does our Nation not owe a trust relationship to these people?

I suspect that other Native communities around the country find themselves in a similar - although I hope not as dire – a predicament as Emmonak suffers today.

While the national unemployment rate has been recently noted at 7.2%, the jobless rate in many Native communities hovers around 50% —with some reservation communities experiencing unemployment rates near 80%.

Sadly, the norm for unemployment in many of our Nation's Indian communities is nearly twice that of the national unemployment rate during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Given an almost complete absence of private sector enterprises in tribal communities, nearly one in four American Indians and Alaska Natives, or about 25%, lives in poverty.

I am hopeful we can again act in a bi-partisan manner and work to include funding to address the urgent needs of Indian Country in President-Elect Obama's proposed stimulus package. We need to create jobs in Indian Country now and we need to

ensure that Indian Country is not overlooked should the stimulus provide increased funding for safety net programs. It really is time for our country to invest in the infrastructure that our Native communities need in order to attract economic development.