

AML Presentation before Gov. Palin's Sub Cabinet Panel on Climate Change

Aug 1, 2007

Call in presentation by Luke Hopkins, Fairbanks, Alaska.

DEC Commissioner Hartig, Fish & Game Commissioner Lloyd, DNR Commissioner Irwin, John Katz Office of the Governor, Deputy Commissioners, Div Directors and representatives for Commissioners of DOT, DCCED and UAF VC for Research - on behalf of the Fairbanks' community and the other 145 communities represented by AML, I thank you for inviting us to give comments.

I am Luke Hopkins, Presiding Officer FNSB Assembly and Alaska Municipal League Board member, co-chair of the AML Climate Change Working Group.

Where We Are Now

This year the AML Board approved the formation of a climate change working group. Since then we have hosted 4 monthly teleconferences to facilitate information exchange among municipal officials, on local and regional actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase energy efficiency, promote renewable and alternative energy uses, and address impacts of climate change in Alaska. These actions provide economic benefits to our communities through reduced energy costs and protection of critical infrastructure.

Recent statewide actions have moved toward a collective sharing of information on the multiple issues of climate change impacts. Most importantly, these efforts need to continue. Statewide teleconferences have heard testimony on critical issues some communities face. Research is being made available to communities through organizations such as ACCAP, SNAP, ISER and IPY activities along with significant ongoing environmental, geophysical and ecological research at Univ. of Alaska. Additionally, the Alaska Climate Impact Assessment Commission established by the 24th Legislature will produce draft findings for the next legislative session in 2008. Many of our member communities have addressed these groups.

True, there are many issues our state as a whole will face in physical and social changes brought on by climate change. The models we are seeing for temperature increases will bring permafrost melting that could alter methods of resource extraction on land, as well as probable changes in our fisheries and timber resources. Many of the infrastructure issues cited by ISER directly impact local governments in their ability to finance the maintenance or replacement of utilities, schools, docks and local roads that are impacted by climatic changes. These changes are expected to impact local revenues. These are the issues that come before our local community officials.

Moving to Policy Actions

This interpretation of the increasing climate impact information into the best local policy is what we are all working towards. We have heard in our AML teleconferences and meetings that responses to climate change impacts are going to be different for Alaska's varied communities; from issues along the Northwest coast to those in the Southeast Panhandle along with models showing warmer river temperatures affecting fisheries along the Alaska Peninsula to changes in subsistence on Alaska's western river deltas due to lower water levels. While temperature data in Fairbanks points to possible longer growing seasons, water absorption rates in soils may be below current levels, but permafrost will be melting leading to ground level subsidence. We see a complex array of climate change impacts statewide. The actions undertaken by this panel can bring forward far reaching solutions.

Responses to climate change impacts need to have realistic timelines based on indicators to answer "how soon" and "how much" should be undertaken to mitigate - or take advantage of - expected climate changes. We had discussions in one hearing on earlier scheduling of fuel oil deliveries to small communities to avoid the predicted lower river levels. Our response was that villages don't receive funding before mid summer for their oil purchases. The alternative of flying in the winter supply of fuel oil sure doesn't buy as much oil. It's these predictions like river water levels combined with funding cycles, even in the near term, that are important to policy makers.

A main concern our group has discussed is how to bridge from scientific data and models to implementing the best policies affecting local government. Communities look at this body of information in shaping local responses to and timelines for climate change impacts. We have heard from ICLEI representatives about their program funded by NOAA to help communities develop a 5 step planning model for local governments to shape their responses to climate changes. This is happening now.

Where do we go from here

Communities are already developing their assessments of local climate impacts through analyzing current scientific information and relying on local observations. This has occurred in Juneau, Homer, Kodiak, Anchorage and soon in Fairbanks.

Some communities are reacting to those most visual changes - receding sea ice conditions, storm erosion in coastal communities, wildfire hazards and fire loading, changing snow conditions, increased tree devastation from insects, local vegetation changes such as increases in leafy shrub growth in northern areas due to warming.

Still other communities are working on issues and policies in energy usage. They're looking at ways to reduce the cost of energy for their citizens, developing sustainable building methods for cold climates that reduce the energy footprint of our homes and larger buildings. Buildings use up to 40% of a community's energy and reducing that amount by half can produce real savings in every community. Alaska's small

communities can also benefit from developing alternative energy programs that reduce energy costs further and reduce the use of diesel based energy generation. This will mitigate green house gas emissions and reduce PM 2.5 emissions. These are real issues for member communities. We all know funding dollars - federal, state and corporate investments – are increasing for research opportunities related to alternative energy, reducing energy consumption and identifying climate change impacts. Support for funding these alternative energy options is critical for communities, critical for helping Alaskans.

Conversation among the AML membership centers on being participants in developing climate change responses. These issues happen at a local level and whatever plan or response to make our communities resilient to changes comes forward, it should be developed with communities' participation.

AML is ready to participate. Our organization continues to interface with both large and small member communities. I understand the Governor's Sub Cabinet Panel needs to be deliberative on many subjects. And I know communities have given testimony to various commissions and statewide programs. We can be at the table when these timely policies are built – the policies that directly impact us at the local level.

Our request is you consider having communities represented on this panel when determining the best course of action for programs that directly affect Alaskans – those that have a direct effect on the communities where Alaskans live.

Thank you and I am available for questions or further discussion.