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My turn: Tackling climate change

Alaska Climate Change Commission hearing to be held Jan. 24 in Juneau

As a 20-year-old Yupik Eskimo from Dillingham majoring in Environmental Studies, I am learning a lot about climate change. I am learning valuable information from my elders, rural Alaskans, my studies and from other people around the world.

Across the United States, indigenous peoples are feeling the effects of climate change. In early December, I attended the Tribal Climate Change conference in Somerton, Ariz., co-sponsored by the Cocopah Tribe and National Wildlife Federation. More than 50 tribes from all over America were represented at the conference. We discussed how climate change is affecting our peoples. The Cocopah Indian tribe has been suffering a lack of rainfall in their desert reservation, which has a huge effect on their crops and drinking water. The Cheyenne River Sioux are witnessing more wildfires that affect their air quality. The Eastern Shoshone of Montana are seeing rapidly melting glaciers, which decreases the amount of freshwater they have. The Dine Navajo are witnessing numerous invasive species on their land. The Gwich'in Athabascan hunting season is affected by changing caribou migrating patterns caused by altered weather and seasons.

Climate change is a human rights issue for Native Alaskans and Native Americans. Our very existence is being challenged.

Climate change is altering our lifestyle in Alaska, from thinning ice and eroding villages to invasive species and changing seasons. The economic effects of climate change are huge. Future generations have much more at stake. Last year, 5,000 Alaskan high school youth from 130 villages and cities signed a petition to our state and national leaders, demanding they take the necessary steps to curb the negative effects of climate change. These youth heard their elders and witnessed the negative effects themselves, and that's why they decided to act. And that is why we all must all do our part to tackle this issue.

I am glad that the Alaska Climate Change Commission was formed. The commission is an important investigative arm to help Alaskans and the world understand what is happening in our state. It is an important first step to effectively document what is happening. It is a tool for both current and future Alaskans on what we need to do to adapt. I was glad to read that the first hearing was held in Fairbanks, with scientists testifying on how our forests and our economy are challenged.

The second commission hearing will be held on Jan. 24 in Juneau, and Alaskans from all walks of life can testify. Even more meetings will be held across Alaska in the future.

With the commission hearings must come action - actions that will effectively help Alaska residents from every corner of the state to adapt in this changing world, and guide us on how each of us can make a difference in our effort to curb the effects of rapid climate change. Instrumental will be our Legislature and Gov. Sarah Palin, who can address this critical issue during their tenure. Delaying action will have a huge price, not only for Alaska Natives, but for our economy and the future generations of Alaska. We all must seize this opportunity to ensure the well-being of our lifestyles, homes and loved ones, and ensure all of this for future generations. Undoubtedly this commission will create compassion, and this compassion will create action.

I encourage people to testify at the January commission hearing and let our decision makers know what we have personally felt from climate change. Public testimony will be heard from 6 to 8 p.m. Jan. 24 at the Capitol. Alaskans not in Juneau also have the opportunity to call in. They can contact their local Legislative Information Office for the call-in number.

- Verner Wilson is a graduate of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action program of National Wildlife Federation from Dillingham and is a junior at Brown University, majoring in environmental studies.

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