



Grace Merkes, representing the  
Kenai Peninsula Borough

## Update from the Board of Directors

### Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council

The Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council held its regular and annual meeting April 4th in Kenai.

Casey Sullivan, Manager of Government Affairs for Marathon Petroleum gave a presentation titled “Energy Matters to Alaska”. The company transports crude oil and refined products in Alaska. The presentation included a brief history of the Kenai refinery in Nikiski, which he says ranks near the top of the company’s operations in terms of safety and reliability, though changing market conditions are making the facility’s profitability more difficult. The refinery currently employs 280 people, and more than 100 associated contractors.

University of Alaska Fairbanks graduate student Sonia Kumar gave an update on her beluga whale studies, which have been funded in part by CIRCAC. The project uses acoustic monitoring techniques to gauge abundance of belugas and other species in the Kenai and Kasilof rivers. The gathered data in the rivers is analyzed as beluga positive minutes. No acoustic evidence of belugas was found in the Kasilof, despite traditional use of the species there. Sonia is working on a paper to try and explain this phenomenon. eDNA samples have also been taken, wherein water samples can be analyzed for DNA material and extrapolated to reflect species abundance. The eDNA studies produced data for king, silver, pink and sockeye salmon as well as eulachon, or hooligan. In the Kenai, belugas were detected during peak pink salmon runs, even though silver salmon make up the bulk of their diet according to earlier studies. The beluga population in Cook Inlet, last surveyed in 2021, showed marginal growth, potentially leveling off a decades-long decline.

We also received an update from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. Ytamar Rodriguez, ADEC Interagency Coordination Manager for the Spill Prevention and Response (SPAR) Program reported that the central region is fully staffed and has seen nearly full employee retention in Fiscal Year 2025. We learned that Deputy Commissioner Christina Carpenter will soon be appointed as Department Commissioner, following the departure of Emma Pokon, who has moved to the Environmental Protection Agency Region 10 (Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Tribal entities). ADEC has planned upcoming training with all staff in Anchorage for presentations on migrating Geographic Response Strategies (GRS) to Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a more readily accessible and dynamic platform for responders to use during a spill event. ADEC issued a permit for tanker transportation to the Don Young Port of Alaska in Anchorage for Bear Logistics on March 10th. The Department is also working on removing the Drift River Terminal on the west side of Cook Inlet from current GRS maps.

Caryn Smith is our Ex-Officio member representing the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. As Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oceanographer, she gave an update on proposed BOEM studies for Cook Inlet that are subject to available funding - two are bird studies for Lower Cook Inlet and another is for passive acoustic studies of Lower Cook Inlet. BOEM has so far lost one staffer in Alaska as a result of recent cuts to federal programs and agencies.

The April meeting also serves as our annual meeting, where we seat new and reelected Board and Committee members. Sean MacKenzie, representing the Municipality of Anchorage; Walt Sonen, representing the City of Seldovia; Robert Peterkin II, representing Tourism Interest Groups; Bob Flint, representing Recreation Interest Groups were all seated to the Council. We also recognized Council members for their years of service and our Volunteer of the Year:

Rob Lindsey (City of Kodiak) – 25 Years

Carla Stanley (City of Homer) – 20 Years

Michael Ophiem (Alaska Native Interest Groups) – 15 Years

Scott Arndt (Kodiak Island Borough) – 5 Years

Dr. Eric Klein (Environmental Monitoring Committee, public member) – 10 Years.

CIRCAC Volunteer of the Year – Scott Arndt

Our next meeting is scheduled for September 5th in Seldovia.