Cook Inlet Citizen Participation: The Keys to Success are Collaboration and Broad-based Participation

Good afternoon – My name is Michael Munger and I am the Executive Director of the Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, or Cook Inlet RCAC. An earlier panel discussed opportunities and concerns of citizens in potential oil and gas activities in areas of the Bering Sea. Although this panel is focused on fisheries and oil industry interactions in Cook Inlet, I would like to utilize my allotted time today to tie this panel to that earlier panel by giving you a brief overview of what we consider to be a successful mechanism for addressing stakeholder concerns regarding oil industry operations in Cook Inlet – and many of those concerns in our area have been fisheries related.

Instead of discussing any of our specific projects such as contaminants monitoring, sensitive habitat mapping, ocean circulation model development, site specific oil spill protection measures, navigational and pipeline risk assessments, or many others – I will focus on the mechanism for successful citizen involvement in developing these projects. That mechanism is the organization I represent – Cook Inlet RCAC – and I will address why we were formed, who we are, what we do and why I believe we are successful. Before I begin my presentation I would like to acknowledge two of Cook Inlet RCAC Directors here today on this panel – Mr. Gary Fandrei who represents the Aquaculture associations and Mr. Bob Shavelson who represents environmental organizations.

Background and Introduction
The Cook Inlet RCAC was established under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90) following the Exxon Valdez spill. OPA 90 established two RCACs – ours in Cook Inlet and one in Prince William Sound. Both RCACs were established under the premise that “only when local citizens are involved in the process will the trust develop that is necessary to change the present system from confrontation to consensus.” The councils were intended to alleviate complacency, which many believe was a primary factor in the Exxon Valdez spill, by fostering long-term partnerships among industry, government, and the coastal communities of Alaska. To that end, the mission of the Cook Inlet RCAC is “to represent the citizens of Cook Inlet in promoting environmentally safe marine transportation and oil facility operations in Cook Inlet.” While there are many critical elements, I briefly want to discuss several of the most important aspects of Cook Inlet RCAC’s approach: 1) collaboration with industry, government, and community partners; and 2) broad-based representation on the board of directors, or Council.

In doing so, I want to point our several major differences in our models and the potential development of similar models in your areas of concern. The Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound RCACs were formed many years after oil spill operations had been initiated in both areas. Cook Inlet has had active oil exploration and production since the 1960s and Prince William Sound activities since the 1970s. We inherited historical activities, existing regulations, and older infrastructures and technologies. We have been able to vastly improve the situations in each area through our efforts, improved technology, new regulations, etc…But, you can build your process using our lessons, mistakes and successes and can demand the newest and best technology and safeguards
be in place. I am not here to support or oppose development in the North Aleutian Shelf areas, I am here to present what I believe have been the keys to successful citizens involvement in our area that could translate to your communities in the event that there is oil and gas exploration, development, or production activities.

Cook Inlet RCAC has often been described as a “watchdog” organization, but according to the intent of OPA 90 and our practices, the Council’s role is to evaluate, advise, and recommend. Evaluation often means conducting our own scientific studies and advising and recommending means providing serious, thoughtful, and accurate input on may different issues. In that role, there are many times when not all parties agree and our recommendations and comments can be considered burdensome to industry or agencies. However, we have found that the biggest steps towards improving prevention and response measures in Cook Inlet and the biggest leaps in improved regulations and safety improvements have been those based on mutual respect, cooperation, and coordination among the citizens, agencies, and industry.

Examples of Benefits and Collaborative Partnerships

By building collaborative teams, we have been able to access better information, garner greater financial resources, and work out conflicts early in the process. For example, we have worked closely with shippers and government agencies to identify Potential Places of Refuge (PPOR) for stricken vessels. This project solicits input directly from local residents early in the process, instead of leaving the decision solely to regulators during and actual ship-in-distress event. A similar process was used to develop site specific protection measures for especially sensitive areas – known as Geographic Response Strategies (GRS) – allowing diverse stakeholders to identify the highest priority locations for protection in the event of an oil spill.

In addition to bringing citizen concerns to decision-making processes, Cook Inlet RCAC also communicates the efforts and perspectives of agencies and oil industry back to its broad constituency through citizen participation on the Council as well as through other outreach efforts.

We have proven the benefits of our process of involving citizens during oil spill prevention and response planning activities and during actual oil spill response efforts in Cook Inlet. We have been able to provide better and quicker access to information and have improved communications between Incident Commanders and local communities under stressful real-time events.

Thus, we believe that one of the Council’s greatest strengths is in its ability to find common goal and build partnerships between and among citizens, regulators, and industry while still maintaining our ability to provide meaningful input towards change.

Broad-based Representation on the Council

Broad-based representation in our organization is another key to the success of citizen involvement. Our constituency is divers, and the composition of the 13-member Council,
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or Board of Directors, is designed to be as representative as possible of Cook Inlet’s communities and various interests. OPA 90 built in a mechanism to ensure broad representation and we represent the Municipality of Anchorage, the Cities of Kenai, Homer, Seldovia and Kodiak, and the Kenai Peninsula and Kodiak boroughs. Other Council members represent specific interest, with one member for each of the following: Alaska Natives, recreation, environmental, commercial fishing, aquaculture, and the State Chamber of Commerce. In addition to the Council members, nine non-voting or ex-officio members represent state and federal government bodies with mandates related to oil industry operations and the environment in Cook Inlet.

Additional opportunities for citizen participation exist through Public Member seats on individual Cook Inlet RCAC committees. OPA 90 ensures representation by Council members and additional interested public members on each committee, ensuring that a wealth of information, expertise, and experience is brought to the Environmental Monitoring Committee, and the Prevention, Response, Operations, and Safety Committee. Through these committees, many Cook Inlet communities and interest groups can be involved in efforts to promote safer oil transportation and production and minimizing environmental impacts.

We provide a formal, legislated, organized, and funded mechanism for multiple interest groups to raise concerns to companies and regulators early and often during all stages of activities and our successes rely on our established and proven communication channels and relationships.

In Conclusion
While I focused this discussion on the collaborative partnerships and broad-based representation on the Council that have been key to the success of our organization, there are other mechanisms for success. OPA 90 has identified numerous mandated tasks for both RCACs and we are meeting the identified goals through a combination of -- independent research, monitoring, and assessments; by obtaining independent scientific technical peer reviews of our efforts; and through continued efforts in public outreach.

As I’ve stressed, our Council representatives provide the direct links between and among their constituent citizens, oil industry, and regulatory agencies. As well, our diverse staff develops and maintains relationships among these groups, ensuring that communications are up-to-date and even to the point of nagging and issuing demands when appropriate. Our most recent success story is that through clear and unanimous recommendations by our broad-based Council, and consistent communications by our staff, Tesoro recently committed to bearing the costs of placing a year-round assist tug for the docking of crude oil tankers at the Nikiski terminal – ahead of regulatory requirements.

That concludes my remarks. Thank you for your attention.