

Nature's Infrastructure_Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative: For People, Salmon, and the
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Hello everyone and welcome to the Nature's Infrastructure audio series, where we will be chatting with our partners, stakeholders and tribal communities to see firsthand how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a difference to communities and conservation nationwide. In November 2021, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was signed, providing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \$455 million in funding over five years to restore Nature's Infrastructure. In these two short years, the service has been putting these dollars to work through projects, which are focused on climate resiliency, community partnerships, and restoring the ecosystems and habitats that are critical to the survival of the fish, wildlife, and plants we are interested to conserve. We are excited to share some of this important work with you as we discover new and exciting ways that these investments are helping protect, preserve, and promote Nature's Infrastructure. This month, we're focusing on the incredible partnerships that are catalyzing the future of salmon conservation in Alaska, through Bipartisan Infrastructure Law investments, and projects that are healing the broader ecosystem and serving Alaska's people and wildlife. More than 100 tribes steward Alaska's Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Norton Sound region, which is a massive geographic area covering over 400,000 square miles. Alaska Native peoples living in this region set up fish camps on these lands, and harvest traditional foods, including salmon, caribou, moose, and migratory birds. These harvests are vital to food security, sovereignty, spirituality, subsistence lifeways, and indigenous cultural practices. However, in recent years, these communities and the ecosystems they depend on have suffered. Climate change is impacting the Arctic four times faster than other parts of North America, and subsistence salmon fishing closures and empty smokehouses are becoming a more common experience. As part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative was established to enhance the resilience of the region's ecosystems and communities through transformational federal, philanthropic, and other investments. On today's episode, I'm sitting down with Amber Vasca, the executive director of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, and Kevin Whitworth from the Kuskokwim River inter tribal Fish Commission to talk about ways the Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative is helping promote critical conservation for the people, salmon and the land. Amber, Kevin, welcome to the show.

Thank you. As mentioned, my family is originally from Aniak on the Kuskokwim River, but I work at the Tanana Chiefs Conference for the interior 37 tribe, which overlaps the Yukon watershed and also part of the upper Kuskokwim watershed. Our tribes have been interconnected with the lands, waters, animals, fish and birds for 1000s of years, and this relationship really defines who we are, what we do, and how we heal. And so protecting the ecosystem lands and waters is really supporting our tribes in our culture, our spirit and our social well being. So I'm really excited to be here today to be able to share a little bit more about our tribes what they're facing in the salmon disaster, and what our tribes are fighting for and costewardship.

Thank you. Appreciate you and the invitation to be here. I'm Kevin Whitworth Executive Director for Kuskokwim River inter tribal Fish Commission. We're 28 tribes along the Kuskokwim River working together on comanagement, research and monitoring of the salmon resource, trying to recover salmon, and working with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a number of different things and comanagement. I'd

like to start by talking a little bit about what Gravel to Gravel is, Kevin, how would you define this initiative? And why is it so important to the management and the stewardship of salmon? This initiative is it's really important for the people and we hear this all the time from our elders up and down the river as we have to work together to try to recover salmon. For the people. The salmon is of most important subsistence resource on these rivers and in particular the Chinook salmon. There is no replacement for Chinook salmon. And the only way forward is vision of our elders, which is to work together. And this Keystone initiative, the Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative is working towards that this vision of working together. So Department of Interior has taken some large steps to start working with tribes. And hopefully we can get offshore to be involved as well and the state of Alaska as well, to try to recover these salmon. And so this initiative is it's a really important step towards the recovery of salmon. Amber, Kevin just talked about the importance of the recovery of salmon and your work really focuses on ensuring Native Alaskan people are not only surviving, but thriving by meeting health and social services needs of tribal members throughout the region. You recently held a Food Security Summit, which addressed food security threats, and look for collaborative ways to secure tribal food sovereignty. How will this gravel to gravel initiative meet some of these needs and improve access to nutritionally sound foods in Alaska's rural communities.

The Food Security Summit that we hosted, we're trying to capture three goals to develop programming within Tenana Chiefs Conference, that captures food as a form of healing, our way of life is based off being able to go out on the lands and waters, and to be able to get the animals, the fish, the plants, and traditionally harvest them and share them. A lot of times, this is our form of healing our form of identity. So it's really important that our goals reflect that. And then also to increase access to fresh and healthy foods. Because in rural Alaska, there's limited resources, especially at the grocery store, and maximize Food Security funding opportunities. The gravel to gravel initiative really focuses on being able to restore our ecosystems so that they come back into balance, and they're able to support the animals, the fish and the birds and plants that we've traditionally lived on, so that our people can continue their ways of life.

And there are a lot of partners involved in this Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative, ranging from Alaskan tribes to federal agencies, the state and nonprofits. Kevin why is the tenant of strengthening relationships and these collaborations through costewardship critical to the success of the projects, as well as to the conservation of salmon. I have a little bit of background working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I worked with them for 10 years and on the federal side working on Department of Interior. And a lot of what I learned when I was working on conservation initiatives is you got to get the local people involved. The local landowners, the farmers, the subsistence resource people, the people who rely on these resources, especially the day to day people, the people who live closest to the resources. These are not only the people who rely on them, but they know the resource the best, the people who live along these rivers, the Kuskokwim Yukon river. These are the people that need to be involved with management decisions, research and monitoring of the resource so that you can have longevity, you can have the best input when it comes to local traditional knowledge. I've learned that as a tribal person, getting the local people's voice heard is the most important and not only heard, but at a comanagement level and an management level making management decisions, getting tribes involved. Talking about the importance of getting local people involved. The people, Kevin, as you said, who rely on resources, and who really understand the local knowledge. It sounds like this is very important to

collaboration for costewardship for species conservation. But Amber, what about the collaboration as it relates to tribes? How's the Gravel to Gravel initiative, giving greater voice to tribes in the decisions and in the research that's affecting subsistence resources?

The ultimate goal for tribes is to become the rightful stewards of their lands and resources. And it's always been our responsibility to be good stewards, protect our animals and fish relatives, we were obligated to ensure their survival for future generations. So it's really important for Tenana Chiefs Conference that we're empowering and building the capacity of our tribes to be able to be at the table because they have the right to be there and it's the first step towards costewardship. There's a lot of barriers to getting our tribes at the table. In Alaska, we have a super complex matrix of jurisdiction regulations and laws related to the management and the stewardship of our lands and resources. So a lot of that really prevents our tribes from having a greater voice. But I really think Gravel and Gravel is a great first step towards costewardship and what it means because costewardship is changing the way our federal partners collaborate with tribes, they must be coordinating amongst themselves and taking this holistic view because tribes don't look at our lands in little square plots. We see the landscape as a whole and how everything works together to create a balance. I really have enjoyed working on this initiative, because it's taking that step towards the holistic view and understanding especially for the keystone species salmon, that salmon start in the their spawning grounds go down to the river to the ocean, and back and all of it is connected. our federal agency partners are really working with our tribes to create that relationship where tribes have equal footing. Tribes are being able to be a part of decision making tribes are helping inform the federal government and decide on what research projects that we think based on our addition established are important to think about when looking at the salmon decline.

And as a follow up to what you're talking about, you mentioned that there's a lot of barriers to getting everybody at the table. What are some practical ways you envision you will overcome the barriers that such a matrixed jurisdiction in Alaska provides? And regarding co stewardship? What would success look like?

Getting over the matrix barrier is something difficult, and it would take the partnership of not only our federal partners, but also state partners, but in Gravel to Gravel, when all of our federal partners are working together with us, we don't have to say okay, National Parks, we're just focused on this national park and then 10 feet from you. Now we need to speak to BLM. Now we're all at the table at once we can say, Well, we think this project on this stream is really important. It's been in our indigenous knowledge. And it crosses the boundaries of National Parks and BLM. Let's make a collaborative project where we can all work together on it. So it starts to break down those barriers that were created because each agency has its own mission, even though the overarching mission, I think, for all of us is we want to ensure our resources for future generations, but they're very specific for each agency, and how they carry out. So that's one way that I see some of those barriers being broken down.

So Kevin, given that we're working on breaking down barriers and coming together for these Gravel to Gravel initiatives, how will the Gravel to Gravel projects strengthen existing conservation and management activities to sustain salmon and other natural resources? Do you have examples of what

this would look like? And are there already specific projects that have been identified and are being implemented on the landscape?

Yeah, well, I don't have to go too far to think about a really great example on the Kuskokwim River inter tribal Fish Commission. You know, we work with the Department of Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through an MOU for costewarding the salmon resource. This has been since 2016 When the MOU was signed. There's a lot of history behind of building up to that point, folks, we're here on the river felt like that advisory role was not enough. There was some deep crashes in the next salmon run just before the 2016 MOU was signed. There was some protest fishing too. I mean, it was a really big uprising here on the river, Kuskokwim River. The MOU really got people together at least tribes they got together and formed Kuskokwim River inter tribal Fish Commission and start working to get this MOU signed. This MOU. I think in the early years it was very difficult to uplift the MOU and the DOI, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had some different views on the MOU. But now that we are eight years into the MOU, nine years into the MOU, it is a very strong and MOU in our relationship or comanagement relationship with Fish and Wildlife with the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. Working with Spencer Rearden, he's the now the refuge manager there and working with him has been great. Now we have our own management plan that was started and spearheaded by the tribes. We have assessment projects and in season assessment of the runs. And there's a lot of different guidelines and projects that we are working towards strengthen this partnership. It's doing really good work. And we're getting people involved. The local people up and down the river are making management decisions. They're making decisions on the salmon run in season and it's a really great example and I foresee this Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative could do a lot of that could be more of a region wide effort. Yukon, Norton Sound, Kuskokwim. This is a really great example to strengthen Gravel to Gravel and what it can look like in the future. And Amber is part of this effort. There's also restoration work that's planned to improve fish passage and restore historic channels that have been impacted because of past development, including 20th century mining operations. You mentioned earlier that the work that is happening is strongly tied to tribal identity. What's the impact this restoration will have not only an identity, but also to the sovereignty, the spirituality and indigenous cultural practices of people who call these lands home.

It's so important because it brings back our reconnection to our lands, and how tribes have stewarded our lands for 1000s of years. In one of our other advocacy projects we were talking about, if you look at your lands, it looks like no human has inhabited it. And that's because we've learned to respect and treat our lands as so for 1000s of years, that it doesn't look like we have inhabited those spaces, because those spaces are so important to us, to our animal relatives, to our fish relatives in order to be able to continue to provide for future generations. So I really see the restoration work as a way for and the opportunity for our tribes and our tribal members to be able to work on our streams and try to restore them to their original form so that they can hopefully provide for future generations and hopefully bring back salmon to those spawning grounds that they used to host so I really see it as a reconnection to our lands and a reconnection to our identity.

In the intro, I mentioned that in recent years, climate change is impacting the Arctic four times faster than other parts of North America, which is really causing communities and ecosystems to suffer.

Kevin, how will reconnecting streams, floodplains and wetland habitat and restoring the vegetation in these areas improve population success and abundance for Pacific salmon?

We are seeing climate change. It is affecting the people. It's affecting the wildlife. There's different ranges throughout life. For instance, there sockeye salmon arriving in different parts of the western Alaska that we have never seen before. Habitat change. We hear from our elders all the time that they've seen a lot of change with climate change impacts on the communities and the people. People are suffering because of the lack of Chinook salmon, chum salmon coming back each salmon, every salmon counts. Every salmon is important to the rebuilding of the Chinook salmon, the chum salmon. And the salmon that are surviving now have survived these climate change impacts that we're seeing. These are the strongest genetics, these are the strongest fish that are going to get us to rebuilding these are the most important ones to get to the gravel to spawn and to rebuild. There needs to be robust management plans in place rebuilding plans, and we have to keep this vision of every salmon is important, not only for the people, but for rebuilding. And we got to get them through the marine environment. We got to get them out to the ocean and we have to have robust habitat and clean habitat clean water, the vegetation, you know the uplands approach that Amber has mentioned the ecosystem approach or the holistic approach to rebuilding salmon in every single All this counts at this point. So Kevin just mentioned the importance of clean water and how these projects are going to help impact water quality. Amber, how do you envision gravel, the gravel projects will promote health and economic wellness to the people of the Yukon and Kuskokwim and Norton Sound region?

One thing that we've been sharing with our federal partners as we've been going through this Gravel to Gravel process is that it's necessary to pay for our tribes to be at the table. And these jobs are necessary to build our capacity in the western way of costewarding our lands and resources. It has to be recognized that tribes are entrusted with the whole welfare of their communities. So they're not only addressing food security, but they're addressing public safety concerns, tribal courts, education and the health of their people. We also have a whole history of indigenous knowledge, which is the best knowledge there is. And so really recognizing that and paying our tribes and our tribal members for the knowledge that they bring to the table when they're here for the Gravel to Gravel initiative, one of the opportunities I do see and that we've been trying to work on is creating these job opportunities in tribes. So they would have someone who is specifically focused on this can be in all the different planning meetings and to be able to grow our own scientist or ologists, so that we can be involved for example, like we TCC and our tribes have never had a hydrologist. But now with Gravel to Gravel, this is something we're looking into. Because hydrology is so important when we're looking at clean water, restoring our river systems and everything. With our tribes and our federal partners working together in the Gravel to Gravel, we can expand a lot of the job opportunities that may have only been for federal people who might have come in out of state or from around the state to those people who are on the homelands. And so it's really exciting.

So annual, chinook and chum salmon harvest are essential for the livelihoods of rural villages within the Yukon and Kuskokwim River ecosystems. But, as we've talked about, over the past few decades, harvests have declined, and in some places, they've actually failed completely. Through the Gravel to Gravel investments in projects. Kevin, you mentioned that there's a plan to work with communities, and to incorporate the indigenous knowledge that Amber has talked about, which will result in what? How

would you define success? I just want to elaborate a little bit the importance of chinook and chum salmon for the people up and down the Yukon and Kuskokwim River. That's such an important part of why we are here. And it's because of the salmon declines and some of the importance of chinook in particular. Like I said, In the beginning of the show, there is no replacement for chinook salmon is the number one subsistence resource that is needed and and people up and down to these rivers they call the river, their grocery store. We can't go down to Fred Meyers or Costco easily access to these places is very difficult. You have to go to the major cities with an airplane or boat. These rivers are really our grocery stores. And if there's no groceries on the shelves, it's in the river, then it's a problem. And these people aren't meeting their basic needs for food. Their culture is not being uplifted and the young people aren't being taught and educated by the elders and the people. But as far as the Gravel to Gravel investment, and the plans that are being developed as we speak now there's conversations about how do we partner? How do we do more research and monitoring of the resource so we can rebuild our salmon resources? Not only for the conservation of species like chinook salmon, but for the people who rely on it. There's several ways that you can measure success and couple of things that we are working towards is trying to involve indigenous knowledge and traditional knowledge at the management making management table so that people with these knowledge bases are there making management decisions on the salary source and not just salmon resources, but subsistence resources that are important to the tribal people. Another way we can measure success here is if the salmon have recovered. So we're meeting escapement goals. Most important, are we meeting subsistence needs and the needs of the people at a certain level so that people are able to harvest and not have to compete over the crumbs. We are competing over crumbs right now, it's not a good place. But if we can recover in their cultures being passed down, they're being nutritionally fed off the rivers again. And they're at the management table. Kevin that's such an important point that you just made talking about the critical impact of these projects, not only to recovery of species, but also to the people. And Amber, you've talked quite extensively about the people who inhabit the lands, I want to circle back to an important point that you made earlier, saying that Gravel to Gravel represents the opportunity to provide a reconnection to lands and to identity. What does success look like?

I think success looks like our tribal members are able to go out on the lands. And if our salmon hasn't recovered yet, that they're able to go after other species that might be a little bit more healthy at the moment. Being able to go out to our lands is so important, like I've mentioned in our identity, because it brings in family strengthening, you go out as a family, each person has a responsibility or role. So it's passing down a lot of our values, and our work ethic to the next generation. And with the absence of salmon, a lot of our families haven't been able to go out to the river. So I'm hoping with the Gravel to Gravel Initiative and the restoration of our various lands and resources that hopefully the salmon recover. But if it's not the salmon, maybe other species recover, so our families can continue to go out together as a unit to pass down those really important skills and values that we get. And then it's also just so important for our health, it's important for physical health to be able to go out, it's important for our mental health, because it keeps us busy during the summer. So those types of things are really important as we're reconnecting with the land, being able to maintain our health having a nutritious diet, but also to be able to heal from when we weren't able to go on our land, heal from what has happened to our people in the absence of salmon for the past few years. It really took a lot of power away from our people. what success looks like is that our culture is resilient and is able to continue to move forward. And we'll find other ways to be able to continue our relationship with the land.

So we've talked about collaboration, collaborative conservation, and getting everyone at the table, we've talked about the importance of bringing in tribes and the decision making aspect. We've talked about resilient culture, we've talked about reconnecting with land and identity. Kevin, is there anything else any other additional thoughts that you have, that we haven't talked about, that you'd like to leave us with? The fish are born in the gravel, this idea of Gravel to Gravel management, they're born in the gravel, they migrate out of the river systems that we live on, out into the ocean, and they have a migratory path in the ocean. And they don't have boundaries, they don't have these jurisdictional boundaries that Amber has brought up. And anyways, they get out to the ocean. And they might live a year or two or three, depending on the species up to five years to and then they make their way back up into the rivers to spawn again and reproduce. And then it's a cycle to life to salmon. The Gravel to Gravel Keystone initiative, it's got to have all the players within this salmon migratory path. All the players have to got to be at the table, including NOAA, including the State of Alaska, and DOI and tribes that are rely on these resources. And this is that image that the elders all along these rivers give us this work together. And we all have to work together to recover salmon for the people in the future. And so, we're not there yet. And there's some there's definitely some big areas that are not at the table. And so I hope we can inspire these other agencies and these other organizations means to come to the table and to help recover the salmon because we got to get there. This is the fight that I think that a lot of us are here for. We live in these rivers for millennia as well. And we will continue to, and we got to recover the salmon species, we all have to we're working on it together. The concept of working together is obviously a very critical one to the success of the gravel to gravel initiative. And Amber, you have talked about that extensively during today's conversation? Is there anything that we didn't cover that we didn't talk about that you want to be sure to mention?

Just like Kevin has mentioned right now, it's really important for all of our tribes and our partners to be advocating that every Seaman counts every seeming counts to get to our spawning grounds. And it's the responsibility of each and every one of us to support our salmon on their lifecycle from the gravel through the river system in the oceans to get make it back to the spawning ground. Like I mentioned earlier, it's our obligation to ensure salmon survival into the future. And it's not just ours as in tribes, but ours, in everyone who is working in the territory and lands and waters of the salmon. And so really understanding that and trying to work together as one to hopefully bring back the same and for our future.

Thank you, Amber and Kevin for taking time to sit and chat about all the important work that's happening on the landscape and the impactful ways that this work is making a difference in stewarding salmon conservation in Alaska.

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And listeners, thank you for taking time with us to learn more about the significant Keystone initiative and how investments from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will help improve the Yukon Kuskokwim and Norton sounds ecosystem and salmon resiliency. Tune in again next month as we share another story about ways that Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is investing on our communities to help protect, preserve and promote nature's infrastructure. We'll see you next time.