

Association of Food and Drug Officials

◆ Elliot O. Grosvenor Food Safety Award ◆

*This nomination must be submitted by **April 1** to be considered for the current year's award*

**Criteria for Nominations**

The Elliot O. Grosvenor Food Safety Award is given to recognize outstanding achievements made by food safety programs within State Departments of Agriculture, Natural Resource Agencies, Public Health Departments or Environmental Conservation Departments in the United States or Canada. The award will go to the program that best showcases improvement, innovation or sustained high performance within a food safety program. A food safety program could include responsibility for: food safety, food protection, and food defense or food sanitation. The applications will be made to the AFDO awards committee by the deadline.

**(PLEASE TYPE)**

Date of Nomination: March 29, 2021 for the year ending December 31,2020

Program's Full Name: Food Safety & Sanitation Program

Nominator: Kimberly Stryker

Immediate Organization: Division of Environmental Health

Agency: Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation

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AFDO Member: Kimberly Stryker

**Executive Summary:**

Though every state's food protection activities is unique, Alaska is faced with exceptional challenges that are distinctive to Alaska, requiring a great deal of collaboration, communication, and coordination among its many diverse stakeholders.

All people deserve access to safe, nutritious food that nourishes their bodies. For thousands of years, Alaska Native peoples' diets included nutrient-rich foods, such as caribou, moose, seal, fish, berries, and other wild plants and animals. In Alaskan villages, 80% of which are not accessible by road, access to fresh foods at grocery stores is quite limited and costly and highly processed, shelf-stable foods are often more economical. Unfortunately, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are becoming the norm in many communities throughout Alaska. Additionally, there are concerted efforts to preserve and honor Alaska Native culture, of which food plays an important role.

For over seven years, the Food Safety & Sanitation program has been collaborating with many stakeholders and partners to support donation, preparation, and service of nutritious traditional foods, particularly in non-profit establishments that serve children and elders. This collaborative effort has resulted in the publication of outreach materials and, ultimately, the first variance in the US for the processing and service of seal oil, a traditional Alaska Native delicacy, in a permitted food establishment.

❑ **Agency Demography (Population Served, Age and Diversity)**

Alaska's state government provides many services to its 731,000 residents that local governments would typically provide. Moreover, these services are provided in a geographic area - much of which is not accessible by road - that represents 20% of the United States (570,640 square miles). The stakeholder groups are very diverse. The state is home to 224 federally-recognized Native Alaskan communities as well as more traditionally "urban" communities. Almost 16% of Alaskans identify as Alaska Native or American Indian (alone) and speak over 20 indigenous languages. Approximately 12.5% of Alaska's population is over the age of 65.

Due to the lack of strong local governmental infrastructure, in addition to the approximately 775 manufactured food firms under the State of Alaska's Food Safety & Sanitation Program's purview, the program also directly oversees food safety for about 4,500 retail and food service operations. As well, the program is the state shellfish sanitation authority, classifying about 25 harvest/growing waters and permitting shellfish harvesters, shippers, and dealers.

❑ **Agency Resources and Budget (Staff, Facilities, Revenues)**

The Food Safety & Sanitation program is staffed by 28 full-time equivalent positions, not all of which carry a full-time facility workload. Additionally, several offices are one- or two-person offices and, in addition to reviewing plans and application, performing inspection, and responding to complaints and inquiries, staff must deposit monies received, pick up mail from the post office, and perform other administrative activities. In addition to the main Anchorage office, the program operates out of seven offices located throughout Alaska.

The program's budget is approximately \$4.2 million. The program is currently funded through about \$2.1 program receipts and approximately \$2 million in federal grants and contracts.

❑ **Program Planning/Self Evaluation (Vision, Staff Participation)**

Alaska's program has been actively striving to meet national standards in both its manufactured food and retail food/food service components. Additionally, the program must meet standards outlined in the National Shellfish Sanitation Program, demonstrating conformance through annual program evaluations. Given that the program is relatively small, many of the inspection staff participate in development and refinement of program policies and procedures, as well as special project designed to enhance the program's protection of the public's health. However, the majority of programmatic planning activities are conducted by the management team, which consists of the program manager (Kimberly Stryker), two section managers (Lorinda Lhotka & Jeremy Ayers), and the program's coordinator (Bobbie McDonald).

In addition to the annual shellfish programmatic evaluations, the FSS management team self-assesses its conformance or progress toward conformance in both its retail food/food service and manufactured food components. For both of these components, the program undergoes audits of their self-assessments. I am proud to share that the program achieved full conformance with the Manufactured Food Regulatory Program Standards and is working toward the same for the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards. It is also in conformance with all elements of its molluscan shellfish program.

We work closely with our stakeholders to protect the health of Alaskans and Alaska's visitors through science-based standards.

❑ **Program Management (Staff Control, Community/Industry/Consumer Support)**

Please see attached Organizational Chart, which describes the program’s organizational structure.

The FSS program is dedicated to engaging and collaborating with its stakeholders. The program leads a Food Protection Taskforce, which is comprised of stakeholders from the retail food/food service arena, as well as food processors, primarily seafood processors (which constitute the bulk of processors within Alaska), and those partners in academia, farmer’s markets, and other interested people.

For the purpose of this application, the focus will be on the program’s collaboration with the following:

- the Maniilaq Corporation, including Maniilaq Traditional Food Facility Sigluaq, the Maniilaq Long Term Care Food Service, and the Maniilaq Medical Care Center Food Service;
- University of Alaska Fairbanks, Kodiak Seafood and Marine Science Center;
- University of Wisconsin, Botulinum Toxins Laboratory;
- the Native Village of Kotzebue,
- NANA Management Services;
- Alaska Native Medical Center;
- University of Alaska Anchorage, National Resource Center for Alaska Native Elders;
- Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Epidemiology;
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Arctic Investigations Program;
- Alaska Department of Public Safety, Alaska Wildlife Troopers;
- University of Alaska Fairbanks, National Sea Grant, Marine Advisory Program.

❑ **Program Implementation (Training, Compliance, Enforcement)**

Generally, the program’s training, compliance, and enforcement programs conform to national standards for retail food/food service and manufactured food. If requested, I am happy to provide further description or copies of program protocols.

❑ **Program Outcomes (Measurable Outcomes)**

The program’s performance measures are reported annually and may be found at:

<https://omb.alaska.gov/html/performance/details.html?p=53>

## Goals for Improvement

Generally, the program's goals are tied to its performance measures (linked above) and we strive to continuously improve in our delivery of services to Alaskans. We have also developed and maintain program-specific strategic improvement plans that align with the national standards.

Specific to the focus of this application, we continue to actively participate in the Alaska Food Policy Council and the Alaska Food Coalition, and we partner with other state agencies to increase knowledge of the use of traditional foods in food establishments.

## □ Issues/Challenges/Risks

As is the case nationwide, Alaska's Food Safety & Sanitation program continues to be challenged in staff recruitment and retention, and resources needed to increase in-person interactions with food establishments and public facilities under its purview.

During this past year, several Environmental Health Officers were deployed to the Incident Command Critical Infrastructure group for COVID response.

The work with Maniilaq Corporation and the Kodiak Seafood and Marine Science Center has been fruitful and satisfying. We hope to see more widespread use of traditional foods within food establishments throughout Alaska.

□ **Summary (Improvement or Innovation that Merits Award)**

## **Background**

As is the case in Western culture, more Alaska Native elders find themselves in long-term care or assisted living facilities, a life change that can be quite jarring, especially when they do not have access to traditional foods, which not only brings their souls comfort, but also serves as an excellent source of nutrition for their bodies.

The Alaska Food Code is based on the FDA Model Food Code, but varies in at least one significant way. Alaskan non-profit food establishments may accept donations of traditional foods, including moose, caribou, whole or gutted fish, and plants. Some foods that are particularly hazardous are not allowed, including fermented food, home-processed hermetically-sealed and reduced-oxygen foods, smoked seafood, seal oil, and bear and fox meat.

Alaska experiences more foodborne botulism illnesses than any other state in the country. From 1950 to 2017, more than 350 people in Alaska have been sickened with botulism and 24 people have died. All Alaska foodborne botulism cases have been associated with the consumption of traditional Alaska Native foods. These include “fermented” foods, dried foods, and traditionally prepared condiments, such as seal oil. In other parts of the United States, foodborne botulism is usually associated with improperly canned foods or with improperly stored unrefrigerated foods.

## **Issue**

In 2014, the Maniilaq Corporation approached the program about incorporating traditional foods into its facilities in Kotzebue. Specifically, they hoped to bring in donated caribou, seal, and other traditional foods as routine menu items. While those foods were already allowed under the Alaska Food Code, the organization requested technical assistance on developing a solid program that ensured food safety. Shortly after completing their work to incorporate allowed donated foods, the organization expressed desire to seek a variance from the Alaska Food Code to offer seal oil (which specifically prohibited this food) to its residents and patients. At the time of the request, there was no approved process to safely render seal blubber. The elder care facility served its first traditional meal, musk ox stew, on September 2, 2015.

## **Initial Efforts**

Lorinda Lhotka and Jeremy Ayers, section managers, were the program’s participants on the Seal Oil Task Force, which held its inaugural meeting in March 2015. Initial work included understanding the existing regulatory framework, regional process of rendering seal blubber for oil, development of a seal oil safety brochure, and researching and identifying scientific resources. During this same time period, the program put together a webpage dedicated to the use of Traditional Foods in food establishments.

## **Development of a HACCP Plan**

In 2016, Alaska’s process authority arranged for a field visit to observe the process of the fall harvest/render of ring seal, spotted seal, and young bearded seal in Kotzebue. Next, the Kodiak Marine Science Center facilitated a seminar on “Safety Concerns for Traditional Native Foods,” presented by the program, and “Botulism from Consumption of Fish & Marine Mammals,” presented by University of Wisconsin expert, Dr. Eric Johnson. Next, the sample collection, analysis, and work toward a HACCP plan commenced and, by early 2017, the experts were beginning to receive some initial test results.

For the next four years, the Native Village of Kotzebue’s Cyrus Harris, Maniilaq Corporation’s Chris Dankmeyer, Kodiak Seafood and Marine Science Center’s Chris Sannito and Dr. Brian Himelbloom (ret.), and University of Wisconsin’s Dr. Eric Johnson worked tirelessly, conducting heat inactivation studies and other work to develop a safe processing plan that honored traditional Native preparation methods and preserved the organoleptic qualities of the oil.

## **Issuance of First US Variance Allowing Seal Oil in Permitted Food Establishment**

At long last, in January 2021, the program received and granted a variance for the processing and service of seal oil at the Maniilaq Traditional Foods Facility and the Maniilaq Medical Center Food Service. This was the culmination of years of collaboration, scientific study, and persistence to help improve the lives of Alaska Native elders!

□ **Attachments**

- Testimonials (maximum of two)
- Acknowledgements
- Appendices

Nominated by: Kimberly Stryker

Signature: 

The winner of this award will identify an individual to receive travel funds (if available and pursuant to AFDO's travel policy) to attend the annual AFDO conference held in June in order to publicly receive an official plaque of recognition and will be given time on the program agenda to comment on the award. The winner will be invited to attend the AFDO Wiley Awards Banquet during the conference.

Attendance is not mandatory for receiving the award. Return this form, a photocopy of this form (both sides) and ***please submit by April 1*** to:

Dr. Joanne M. Brown  
Chair, AFDO Awards Committee  
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