

Pursuing Alternative Energy Options for Western Alaska Is Critical
By George Guy

No one understands the staggering cost of energy, the importance of subsistence, and the need for community sustainability better than residents in rural Alaska. Because the cost of energy impacts the way we are able to provide services and do business in Western Alaska, several regional organizations in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta came together to create a non-profit utility, Nuvista Light & Electric (Nuvista). The organization is not a subsidiary of Calista.

In 2011, under the continued guidance of the board of directors and through a legislative appropriation, Nuvista began reviewing 40 years of alternative energy studies and considering potential options for Western Alaska – including the feasibility of hydroelectric generation at Chikuminuk Lake. Understanding that a great amount of data would be needed to bring stakeholders and the State Legislature to a decision point on whether this proposal might be a good fit, Nuvista began preliminary studies of the site to develop baseline understanding of the area, assess potential capacity, and evaluate any impacts.

Because Chikuminuk Lake is currently designated by the State of Alaska as wilderness area, Nuvista has been unable to access the lake to conduct in-depth studies. Unlike the assumptions made in Mr. Angstman's Feb. 21 editorial, not much is currently known about the environment at Chikuminuk Lake or potential downstream effects – particularly to fishery, mammal, and raptor habitats. At this point, making claims about impacts due to hydroelectric generation at Chikuminuk is conjecture. Until the site has been studied, we do not yet know if the projected costs and impacts outweigh the potential benefit of stable, renewable, clean power.

As a result, during the 2013 Legislative Session, Nuvista began seeking legislation that would allow greater study of Chikuminuk Lake, to learn if a hydroelectric project would make sense for both the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay regions to pursue. If greater site access was granted by the Legislature, Nuvista would develop study plans in consultation with stakeholders in both regions to ensure evaluation of all effects a project would have on such critical resources. Prior to any potential project, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requires a detailed, thorough, and transparent analysis of all potential impacts. It should be noted that Nuvista did not request the authorization language for greater research at Chikuminuk Lake to be inserted into HB77 and the organization's research efforts remain a separate initiative than the rest of the proposed legislation.

The importance of maintaining pristine subsistence and sporting resources in Western Alaska is not lost on Nuvista or its leadership. However, with more than 50% of the monthly income of some families in rural Alaska spent on heating their homes and turning on the lights, we are compelled to evaluate any alternative energy options available to us.

The path to regional energy solutions is not clear and no initiative is perfect, but we must position ourselves to begin pursuing opportunities available to our communities. Nuvista is poised to consider any options "on the table" and hydroelectric generation at Chikuminuk Lake has been just one. Primarily, Nuvista seeks to fulfill our mission, which is to improve the energy economics in rural Alaska by creating energy generation and transmission infrastructure to serve,

connect and enable the region to attain affordable, long-term energy sustainability and self-sufficiency.

George Guy has served as the Nuvista Board Chairman since its formation. He is a lifelong resident of Kwethluk. Organizations which have served, and continue to serve, on the Nuvista Board of Directors include: AVCP, AVCP RHA, AVEC, YKHC, Calista, Chaninik Wind Group, Middle Kuskokwim Electric Cooperative, and a representative from the Lower Yukon.