



# Making the Political Win to Save Bristol Bay Permanent

How the Oak Foundation funded a lasting environmental legacy

A national policy lifts protections on a region's rich marine resources. Your foundation wants to invest in a campaign to fight back. How do you calibrate your support so that it achieves immediate protections while building local capacity to launch a counterattack should the political tides shift again?

When the Oak Foundation decided to help the people of Bristol Bay, Alaska fight for permanent protections against offshore oil and gas drilling, it had this question in mind. "We didn't want to be part of a classic environmental group story: they come in, they build a campaign, maybe they achieve it, and then they're out," says Anne Henshaw, marine conservation,

Arctic and North Pacific programme officer at the Oak Foundation. "That leaves local people with the memory, 'Yeah, you just came and left and here we are. We have no sustainable economy.' We wanted to invest in a durable political win that local people would benefit from long-term."

Oak started funding in Bristol Bay in response to the possibility of the George W. Bush administration reopening the area to offshore oil and gas development in 2007. "Oak already had a grantmaking program in Alaska with partners who were well-positioned to work on the issue," says Anne.

Oak sought ways to ensure a lasting legacy for the people of Bristol Bay from the very beginning. In 2008, Oak commissioned a statewide landscape scan on indigenous actors and organizations, both working in Bristol Bay and other parts of Alaska, as part of an attempt to see if there were opportunities to collaborate and foster partnerships with the environmental community. "There was a long history of local activism by diverse stakeholders that we needed to understand," says Anne. Indeed, Bristol Bay's Native people, local communities, and fishermen have long battled to protect the region from offshore oil and gas drilling. While Bristol Bay received Congressional and Executive protection from drilling after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989, by the mid-2000's both protections were lifted. "A convergence of high oil prices, strong interest by an oil company in drilling in the region, and a pro-drilling President led to rolling out the red carpet for oil and gas leasing and granting companies access to drill in Bristol Bay," says Kelly Harrell, executive director, the Alaska Marine Conservation Council. "That's when it became clear to many that a campaign was needed to stop the leasing and seek more permanent protections."

## Why Should We Care About Bristol Bay?

Despite its remote location, Bristol Bay is a region of global ecological and economic significance. Twenty-three species of marine mammals, large populations of waterfowl, and migratory bird species from four continents rely on its coastal lands and marine waters. Perhaps best known for fish, Bristol Bay is the largest remaining wild salmon habitat on Earth.

Bristol Bay's fishing industry fuels the local and U.S. economy. According to the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, over 40 percent of U.S. domestic wild caught seafood production totaling more than \$2 billion annually comes from Bristol Bay and the southeast Bering Sea. The seafood industry in Alaska represents the number one employer and a major contributor to the tax base of Alaska's coastal communities, employing about 5,000 people in the Bristol Bay region.





From its analysis and campaign experience in the Arctic, Oak realized having local players in the lead was key to lasting success. The campaign couldn't be driven by an environmental group based in Washington, D.C. "You cannot do conservation work in Alaska without having communities in front defining their own vision and management for their region," says Anne. "That's why we approached the campaign from the bottom up, making sure that local communities were the ones calling for the protection."

Oak engaged in campaign building with a clear sense of its role—the funder. It made grants to engage local communities, including direct grants to indigenous organizations and national environmental groups that valued a locally-grounded approach. It selected groups invested locally and willing to work together toward the common goal of seeking permanent protections from offshore drilling. Then, Oak took on a role of relationship-builder, forging connections between the local and the larger, national organizations. Oak supported the coalition behind the scenes through direct funding, lending campaign expertise, and co-funding with Pew Charitable Trust, which joined the coalition and remains an important funder in the region.

"Clarity on the shared goal helped the coalition form with little need for formal structure or hierarchy," says Anne. Those involved took on different aspects of the work, from communications, to constituency organizing, litigation, legal analysis, and policy work, each largely proposing its role and scope. While coalition members shared information informally day-to-day, one group facilitated weekly

conference calls throughout the campaign. "That group really set a tone for inclusivity and respect in coalition interactions," says Anne.

Oak's funding lasted until the coalition prevailed. In December 2014, President Obama permanently removed the region from consideration for oil and gas leasing.

While for Oak this represented success, the real win was contributing to something more durable for the people in the region. That meant keeping people squarely at the center of its conservation approach. "Ultimately, you can't do conservation without people," says Anne. "You need people who are aligned with shared values to build a lasting legacy."



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ANNE HENSHAW, OAK FOUNDATION



Grantees credit Oak for contributing to the coalition's constructive dynamics. "Oak understood the various groups who were involved in battling offshore drilling and fueled the campaign by providing resources to the key organizations, which was absolutely critical to winning," says Kelly. "Oak recognized there were conservation groups, fishing organizations, Alaska native organizations, and tribes who needed representation within the campaign structure and they helped make that happen."

The way in which Oak facilitated connections made a difference. "Oak program staff would ask, 'Did you talk to so-and-so about this?'" says Kelly. "They made it clear that they expected us to collaborate. They also distributed money to multiple partners, which allowed each partner to come to the

table as an equal. They spread the resources around which helped create a strong foundation for collaboration and each group bringing its best to the table and to the campaign. All of us who worked on the campaign have remarked about the extremely high level of honesty, openness, and collaboration we experienced. There are few other campaigns that people talk about like that. I really think that Oak helped set that tone through the way they approached their support with the different partners.”



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Oak’s consistent support over the campaign’s seven years gave the partners a sense of security that contributed to the win. “All of us felt like Oak was standing there as a strong supporter and collaborator,” says Kelly. “That helped give us the stability we needed to plan, execute, and ultimately win the campaign.”

Does Bristol Bay stand ready to push back if and when new state and federal administrations seek to roll back these protections? Oak remains invested, providing support for economic modeling that is examining how fishing, tourism and other industry can bring more resources to the region than offshore drilling. The real proof will be the extent to which the people in the region can once again form a united front. A good sign: “Those of us that worked together on the campaign have begun strategizing about how to make sure Bristol Bay stays protected under the new Presidential administration,” says Kelly. “We’re already talking about sending a joint letter.”

## What Does Permanent Protection Mean For Bristol Bay?

President Obama’s December 2014 executive order permanently withdrawing Bristol Bay from offshore drilling was a landmark victory for conservation, local communities, and the region’s fishing industry. Yet, because the protection can potentially be undone by another presidential administration, campaign partners including the Alaska Marine Conservation Council will continue monitoring efforts to unravel the executive order. Partners are also working to support healthy communities and economies in the region, such as by increasing fishing opportunities for local residents and profitability of fishing operations, which help combat the potential for future unsustainable development. Communicating the importance of the long and hard-fought victory to future generations is also critical, as if history is any indicator, they will be responsible for defending the region for decades to come as long as valuable resources such as oil, gas, and minerals lie beneath its rich waters.

To learn more about the legacy of protection for Bristol Bay, please visit [akmarine.org/who-we-are/publications](http://akmarine.org/who-we-are/publications)



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This case study was developed as a companion piece to stories shared through Foundation Center's Funding the Ocean project

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This case study was written by Anna Pond.

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