



ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

2007 Federal Priorities

Federal Erosion and Flood Control Assistance for Alaska Native villages

184 of the 244 Native villages in rural Alaska are affected by serious erosion and flooding and must address imminent threats to community health and wellbeing as a result. But they have been denied assistance under federal erosion/flood prevention and control programs because agencies utilize cost/benefit analyses that fail to take into account the unique geographic, climatic and economic circumstances of the villages.

In 2003, the U.S. General Accounting Office's report to Congress concluded that "[t]he unique circumstances of Alaska Native villages and their inability to qualify for assistance under a variety of federal flooding and erosion programs may require special measures to ensure that they receive certain needed services."

Coastal and river flooding and erosion resulting from rising temperatures in recent years have caused grave damage. Melting sea ice has left coasts vulnerable to waves, storm surges and erosion; and thawing permafrost has caused serious damage, as buildings and runways sink into unstable ground. This threatens bulk fuel tanks and other vital infrastructure. Erosion, accelerated by a series of near-catastrophic storms, has given rise to public health, safety and welfare concerns. Eroded land has exposed sewer and septic systems, jeopardized community water lines, affected the availability of groundwater and surface water, undermined roads and utilities structures, and rendered unusable many road systems that are the only available escape routes in times of emergency.

At least four villages are now in imminent danger from flooding and erosion and must relocate as soon as possible. Other affected communities need immediate federal and state assistance to undertake preventive measures that will mitigate future damage and restore infrastructure that is critical to their health and safety. Time is of the essence as villages become increasingly susceptible to flooding and erosion. Development of a well-coordinated approach to mitigate current and future damage is essential.

Recommended Action: Congress should implement the four alternatives listed in the 2003 GAO Report to lower barriers that villages face in obtaining federal assistance:

- Expand the role of the Denali Commission to include responsibility for managing a flooding and erosion assistance program;

- Direct the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to consider social and environmental factors in their cost-benefit analyses for projects requested by Alaska Native villages;
- Waive the federal cost-sharing requirement for flooding and erosion programs for Alaska Native villages that don't have matching resources; and
- Combine funds from various agencies to address flooding and erosion problems in Alaska Native villages.