

# Relocation of Alaska Native Villages

## A progress report on flooding and erosion relocation challenges

In December 2003, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that most of Alaska's more than 200 Native villages were affected to some degree by flooding and erosion. Since then, state officials have identified the growing impacts of climate change, as well as the increased urgency for federal and state efforts to identify imminently threatened villages and assess their relocation options.

### GAO Findings

While the flooding and erosion threats to Alaska Native villages have not been completely assessed, federal, state, and village officials have identified 31 villages that do face imminent threats. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) March 2009 Alaska Baseline Erosion Assessment identified many villages threatened by erosion, but did not assess flooding impacts. At least 12 of the 31 threatened villages have decided to relocate—either partially or entirely—or to explore relocation options.

GAO was asked to report on these four components:

- 1) Flooding and erosion threats that Alaska Native villages currently face.
- 2) Federal programs available to assist villages facing potential disasters.
- 3) Status of village relocation efforts.
- 4) How federal assistance to relocating villages is prioritized.

GAO interviewed and gathered documentation from federal and state agency officials as well as regional organizations and village representatives. While a comprehensive report was made available and posted on the GAO website, the following is a summary of the findings.

Federal programs designed to assist threatened villages prepare for and recover from disasters and protect and relocate them are limited and unavailable to some villages. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has several disaster preparedness and recovery programs, but villages often fail to qualify for them, generally because they may lack approved disaster mitigation plans or have not been declared federal disaster areas.

Although there is no single comprehensive proactive federal program to assist villages with their relocation efforts, individual federal agencies can assist villages on specific projects, such as funding the construction or relocation of homes. However, 64 villages do not qualify for affordable housing and relocation assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant program. This is because the federal laws governing the program does not

The seawall in Kivalina, Alaska struggles to keep the ocean at bay.

The village of Kivalina is precariously located on the Bering Sea.



recognize unincorporated Alaska Native villages in Alaska's unorganized borough as eligible units of general local government.

Of the 12 villages exploring relocation options, Newtok has made the most progress in its relocation efforts. The Newtok Planning Group, formed in 2006 by federal, state, regional, and village partners, has helped to accelerate the relocation process that the village proactively initiated in 1994. The three other villages that will likely need to relocate all at once—Kivalina, Shaktoolik, and Shishmaref—have yet to identify sites that federal, state, and village officials agree are safe, sustainable, and desirable for the subsistence lifestyle of the villagers. Eight other villages have begun to gradually migrate to new locations over time or are evaluating options for doing so.

In the absence of a lead entity, federal agencies individually prioritize assistance to villages on the basis of their programs' criteria. These criteria do not necessarily ensure that the villages in greatest peril get the highest priority, and although the Corps has assessed erosion threats, there is no lead federal entity to prioritize and coordinate assistance using this information.

In 2007, the Newtok Planning Group reported that the lack of designated federal and state lead entities to guide, coordinate, and fund assistance impeded village relocation efforts and created uncertainty regarding the fulfillment of environmental analysis requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act. In 2008, the state designated a lead agency for village relocation assistance, and federal, state, and village officials told GAO that a similar lead federal entity is needed. Lead authority could be provided to an existing agency or commission, or a new entity could be formed for this purpose.

## Recommendations

GAO recommends that Congress consider the following actions:

- 1) Directing the Corps to conduct a flooding assessment in Alaska to augment the Corps' recently completed erosion assessment.
- 2) Amending the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 to allow 64 additional villages to be eligible grant recipients.
- 3) Designating or creating a lead federal entity that could work in conjunction with the lead state agency to coordinate and oversee village relocation efforts.

The full report, *Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion* (GAO-09-551) is available on the GAO website at: <http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-09-551>

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Because of its location, Shaktoolik, Alaska is very susceptible to flooding and erosion.

