

WATER AND WASTEWATER SYSTEMS FOR RURAL AND NATIVE ALASKAN VILLAGES

Why the Rural and Native Alaskan Villages Grant Program Is Important

Rural Alaska is home to over 280 isolated villages scattered across an area more than twice the size of Texas. Their population is predominantly Native. Many of these communities are low income, with rates of unemployment frequently exceeding 50%. Some are in remote locations only accessible by water and air. The state estimates that one family in three does not have a sanitary way to dispose of sewage or an adequate supply of safe drinking water. For members of these families, buckets or pit privies are the only way to dispose of human waste, and people must haul water for drinking and bathing from community watering points or untreated sources such as creeks or rivers, increasing health risks from exposure to the waste.

- As a result, Alaska Natives are hospitalized for infectious diseases at a rate 28% higher than the national average. The rate is even higher for infants.
- Approximately 22% of all tribal and Alaska Native Village hospitalizations are for infectious diseases, including lower respiratory tract infections; skin and soft tissue infections; and infections of the kidney, urinary tract and bladder.

How the Rural and Native Alaskan Villages Program Works

- The Rural and Native Alaskan Villages Grant Program provides funds to address serious human health and water quality problems in communities that lack basic drinking water and sanitation infrastructure such as flush toilets and running water. Alaska Native villages and other vulnerable rural areas are disproportionately affected by the lack of such services.
- The state of Alaska sets priorities for receiving infrastructure funding based on risk and directs funds to projects that will have the greatest public health and environmental benefits. The state or local contributions must fund 25% of the project costs.
- The program assists communities with the construction of new or improved drinking water or wastewater treatment systems.
- Funds may also be provided for technical assistance to help communities maintain and protect their water infrastructure.

Consequences if the Program Is Eliminated or Inadequately Funded

- Many Alaskan Native villages and other rural communities would be denied opportunities to install or upgrade drinking water and wastewater infrastructure critically needed to protect people's health and the environment.
- Children and adults in communities that lack sanitary facilities would continue to suffer significant and disproportionate health problems resulting from exposure to raw sewage and drinking water contaminants.

Demonstrated Successes

A 2008 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that health disparities associated with the lack of in-home water service could be addressed through sanitation infrastructure.

- Both waterborne disease rates and health care costs have decreased through the reduction of exposure to raw sewage and drinking water contaminants.
- Villages that receive funding from the Alaska Native Villages program for the construction of water sanitation facilities have a lower risk of skin infections and respiratory illnesses and overall improvements in daily well-being.

One example is Kwethluk, the largest underserved community in Alaska. A total of 181 homes lacked access to drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Community members hauled potable water from a central distribution point and disposed of human waste using open buckets that were transferred in collection containers via ATV to a lagoon outside of town. These conditions presented major health risks as spills were common and contamination was spread throughout the community by rain and airborne dust. In 2009, the Rural and Native Alaskan Villages grant program and other partners funded the construction of drinking water and wastewater treatment facilities and plumbing connections to each home. When the project was complete, families throughout the Kwethluk community had flush toilets in their homes and were able to drink water safely from their taps for the first time.

Funding for Infrastructure Assistance: Rural and Native Alaska Villages

FY2016 Baseline Budget: \$20 million

FY2017 President’s Budget Proposal: \$17 million

FY2017 Amount Appropriated: \$20 million

FY2018 President’s Budget Proposal: \$0

FY2018 Amount Appropriated: \$20 million

FY2019 President’s Budget Proposal: \$3 million

FY2019 Amount Appropriated: \$20 million

FY2020 President’s Budget Proposal: \$3 million