

TESTIMONY OF  
THE VILLAGE OF UNALAKLEET  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND  
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
AD HOC SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISASTER RECOVERY  
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THE STATE AND FEDERAL RESPONSE TO STORM DAMAGE AND  
EROSION IN ALASKA'S COASTAL VILLAGES

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Welcome to our great State of Alaska. I am Steve Ivanoff from Unalakleet and will be speaking to you today as a representative of the eastern Norton Sound, an area that has felt the effects of increasing fall storm intensity.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the flood and erosion problems we have along the western Alaskan coast. All of the villages in our Bering Straits region are situated along the coast with a handful experiencing erosion in and around the communities.

Introduction – Background (informational)

Unalakleet is 393 air miles west of Anchorage on the easternmost part of Norton Sound. This location was selected to provide quick and easy access to the many subsistence activities that this area has to offer. It sits on a sand-spit between the Unalakleet River and the Norton Sound. This settlement has been estimated to be in existence for over 2000 years. The population is approaching 800 with an Alaska Native population of approximately 85%, Inupiat and Yupik Eskimos, and Athabaskan Indians. It is classified as a regional sub-hub, serving mail and freighting services for itself and four other villages. The Bering Straits

School District central offices are located in Unalakleet serving 15 villages in the Norton Sound region, and a sub-regional clinic that provides medical services for Unalakleet residents and four other villages. Commercial fishing in our region struggled for a decade but is making a substantial recovery. Unalakleet has also become a service providing community. A 6,000 foot runway was constructed in the 60's as our village was a host to hundreds of Air Force service men for a couple of decades having an Air Force base 5 miles northeast of the village. A White Alice site was also stationed 10 miles to the east, along with a Federal Aviation Administration facility, housing a number of workers and their families. These facilities were all shut down with the end of the cold war and modern technology.

**FLOODING** – The Norton Sound area went 29 years without a flood from 1974 until 2003, we then had 3 in a row having disaster declarations in 2003,2004, and 2005. The next village 38 miles north of us, Shaktoolik, becomes an island during these floods with no means of evacuation. They have a population of roughly 250 residents and are all on watch during these floods, hoping for the tide to reverse before the ocean consumes them. Our floods occur during the late evening, early morning hours when it is dark and dangerous to navigate any type of boats. They need an evacuation road, as their airport too is flood prone.

**EROSION** – Erosion in our community has occurred in several sections within the city boundaries. The greatest erosion occurs at the mouth of the river, additional erosion occurs along the beach. In 2000, a gabion wall erosion protection project was constructed beginning inside the mouth of the river, runs around the mouth and traverses northerly along the ocean beach. This 1400-foot project was funded by NRCS in the amount of \$1 million. The gabion wall is shown in the attached photos. The timing of the wall couldn't have come at a better time protecting a church, a fish processing plant, a store, a hotel and restaurant, the Post Office, teacher housing, school district storage fuel tanks, a small engines repair shop, and several homes. This southern section of town is

the heart of the village and would have seen substantial damage without the wall. We felt the gabion wall would have a five-year life span and give us enough time to work towards a permanent fix. The wire coating is coming off and is now rusting and quickly deteriorating. Repair work must be done following each storm and back fill replaced.

The Corps of Engineers are in the final stages of a design for a riprap wall that would put armor rock along the full length of the gabion wall. We have had several public meetings reviewing the design and are very pleased with the recommendation. The riprap wall was the most feasible option over a 50-year period having the lowest maintenance cost. Once the design is complete we will seek funding for this project and are hoping for your assistance.

The State DOT is also completing an erosion design for a riprap wall along the beach adjacent to the DOT property and airport. This project is along the northern end of the community. It is scheduled to go out to bid this coming winter with construction expected to start next season. The State DOT is also in the process of elevating the evacuation road and will complete this project next summer. A section of this road would be completely submerged in the peak of the storms so some of our residents requested that poles be installed so they would know where the road is as they exit on their vehicles during a storm.

Our community water source is located 5 miles north of the village and the piping runs on the side of the roads along the beach. Erosion threatens this line along several sections of pipe so the Village Safe Water is working on a design to construct a new line along the hillside, well away from the beach. This project is expected to start within 2 years.

In Unalakleet we are fortunate to have hills a short distance away that we are now migrating into. More of our residents are now building homes in these hills, even if it means packing their water because it offers a long-term safe area.

Several of the homes have wells and septic systems. We do need to build access roads to speed up the process to encourage more development in these hills. The riprap wall will protect the heart of our village as it protects our structures that are needed to function until we can make the transition into the hillside.

Shaktoolik was a village situated 8 miles east of the village until the Bureau of Indian Affairs built a school near the beach forcing the residents to migrate to what is now called the old site. Following the flood of 1974 the village moved 2 miles further north to higher ground where it is now located. The natural barrier that had protected them for nearly 30 years has eroded from the 3 floods and is no longer sufficient to provide for their safety.

St. Michael, 54 miles south of Unalakleet, has also had erosion and may need to move several homes in the near future. Fortunately for them, higher ground is a short distance away.

There are funds available for reactive measures but not nearly enough for proactive measures. In the news we hear about the funds of the Gravina Bridge being in limbo. I recommend we funnel these and direct other necessary funds towards floods and erosion, how can anyone argue with providing safety for our residents that are in harms way.

A number of Alaska Native Villages that are either coastal communities or situated along rivers or streams continue to experience significant loss of land and property, and significant threat to life. These events are increasing not only in number but also in severity. Some of these villages do not have the internal capacity and funds to handle the additional burden of interacting with the various state and federal agencies.

I believe the state needs to get more involved and send their administrators to the most affected communities to see first hand the dire situations we face. The State DOT has made some improvements for roads and airport protection but I feel the state needs to get more involved with our erosion problems along residential areas. One problem I have with the DOT matrix system is that it does not give enough merit to life and safety flood issues. This should be above and beyond all other needs. The projects, such as an evacuation road in Shaktoolik, does not score well under their system. Yes, they are small in population but our federal government can take some credit for putting them in harms way with forced relocation of the 1930's.

I have served on the Denali Transportation Committee since it was formed two years ago and am very pleased with their work. We had the committee travel to our villages this spring that gave them an understanding about the threats that we have to live with. For them to walk along the massive piles of Yukon logs that are washed up against the homes in Shaktoolik was definitely an eye opener. We are also pleased with the Emissions Bill in Congress that could direct assistance for this in the future and would be willing to speak in support of it.

The state and federal agencies need to assess the flood and erosions in the communities that have immediate needs. We support the GAO recommendation that a federal agency be appointed to lead a workgroup consisting of various federal and state agencies to address the flood and erosion issues in rural Alaska. We also recommend that rural Alaskans be on the workgroup to make recommendations to Congress and the state of Alaska to streamline the process so that projects can be constructed sooner rather than later. We, in our region, know the communities in dire situations and are available to make recommendations for site visits and assessments. This workgroup could be within the Denali Commission and led by the Corps of Engineers because of their expertise and understanding of the issues at hand.

We appreciate our Washington delegation and their staff making trips our to problematic areas. We now need to get the state administrators to educate themselves in this area. Do we have an obligation to provide for the safety and protection of our people living under these conditions? They have fallen victim to circumstances that no one saw coming so quickly. Just as we heard of the warnings prior to the hurricane in New Orleans, this is a warning we are giving. In conclusion, I invite you all to visit our area and see the threats we face. I promise we will make it a pleasant trip for you and one that would be very worthwhile.