

AN OVERVIEW OF FLOODING, EROSION AND VILLAGE RELOCATION EFFORTS IN THE NATIVE VILLAGE OF NEWTOK, ALASKA

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The Native Village of Newtok is a traditional Yup'ik Eskimo community located in Alaska's coastal zone within the broad Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta of western Alaska, near the Bering Sea. The village is located on the north bank of the Ninglick River which connects the Bering Sea with Baird Inlet, located upstream from Newtok.

Traditionally a nomadic people who moved seasonally with the subsistence resources of the area, the people of Newtok settled permanently at the current village site when a school was built there in the late 1940s. Since then, the village has been threatened by a high rate of erosion of the Ninglick River bank adjacent to the village. The north bank of the river eroded approximately 3,320 linear feet of land in front of the village between 1954 and 2003. The river is eroding toward Newtok at an average rate of 72 feet per year, with a maximum yearly observed rate of erosion of 300 feet per year. Studies by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others have determined that there is no cost-effective way to provide the village with permanent protection from the encroaching river.

In the early 1990s, the Newtok community began efforts to relocate to a new site. The community selected a site on Nelson Island, located approximately nine miles to the south of Newtok. The people of Newtok share a strong cultural heritage with the three communities currently living on Nelson Island; their ancestors have lived on the Bering Sea coast for at least 2,000 years. Because the selected new village site was on Federal land within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, the village's acquisition of the 11,000-acre site took place through a land exchange with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, authorized by Public Law 108-129 on November 17, 2003.

In the ensuing years since village relocation efforts began, Newtok has experienced a succession of challenges set in motion by the progressive erosion of the Ninglick River bank and the changing environment of the Bering Sea. Changes in the river channels that surround Newtok have increased the frequency and severity of flooding in the village. An important land buffer that once protected the village from coastal storms has eroded away. Recent storm events have flooded the village water supply, caused raw sewage to be spread throughout the community, displaced residents from homes, destroyed subsistence food storage, and shut down essential utilities. Loss of critical infrastructure to erosion has impacted the village's ability to receive vital supplies such as heating fuel and food.

In 2006, the village began working closely with a coalition of government agencies and non-profit organizations known as the Newtok Planning Group. This presentation will examine the challenges being faced by the community due to erosion and flooding. The presentation will also investigate the efforts being made by the village in partnership with the Newtok Planning Group to relocate the village to a safe location where a sustainable new community is being developed through some unusual collaborative efforts.

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