



*Alaska Forum on the Environment
Climate Change – Communities in Peril
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These remarks followed two hours of presentations by the State of Alaska, US Army Corps of Engineers, the Northwest Arctic Borough and leaders from the villages of Shishmaref, Newtok, Unalakleet, Shaktoolik and Koyukuk.

Please take time to get to know Admiral Gene Brooks, the Commander of Alaska's Coast Guard District 17 and Region 10 EPA Administrator Elin Miller. It's a high complement to all of you that leaders at their level are taking the time to stay and listen through this entire session on Communities in Peril. They will be part of the solution for our communities, and I'm delighted they're here.

We've had eloquent testimony on the urgent need to plan and coordinate the relocation of communities now being directly impacted by climate change. I need to add a splash of reality to the discussions, however and then give you some positive action steps to take from here.

Despite all our talk, there is no pool of money, at the local, regional, state or federal levels to pay for relocating communities. It doesn't exist. And you need to know there is a lack of understanding, empathy and support on the part of lower 48 decision-makers for spending large sums of money to move a handful of people to newly constructed villages.

And worst of all, despite it being obvious to every Alaskan in the room, many decision-makers, when confronted with the problem, don't understand why you can't simply move to a regional center like Bethel, Nome or Kotzebue. We know why – that we're talking about the absorption and loss of cultures and identities. And once these tribes are assimilated, there is no going back. There is little appreciation that here in Alaska, unlike the lower 48 states, there has been no wholesale removal of indigenous people, that Alaska Natives live in the same places as their ancestors did hundreds and thousands of years ago, that the connection to the land is so much stronger than in other places. Alaskan tribes – and I mean this in the broadest context – all 229 federally recognized tribes, plus the cultural diversity of Anglos and all the rest – are national treasures to be respected and celebrated.

So where do we go from here? Let me give you several ideas:

First, please give full support to Commissioner Larry Hartig, and his Immediate



Action Working Group co-chaired by Deputy Commissioner Mike Black and Trish O’Pheen from the Corps of Engineers. They are providing a forum for agency and community experts to listen to each other and to forge a strategy for the way ahead.

Second, work with us to tell Alaska’s story. While I can’t recite it yet, I know it will contain these elements:

- Alaska holds a special mystique with the American public. We are America’s last wild place. We need to convince our fellow citizens that Alaskans are the best stewards of the environment on the planet; that no matter what happens, we are guardians of our national treasures.
- People are a key part of the environment. We are together a family of tribes, many under stress, but overall with vibrant living cultures that are irreplaceable.
- That we have all governmental systems in place, from emergency evacuation plans to long-range strategic planning to expertly take care of evolving situations. At Denali Commission, we’re working to establish a high-level group of federal agency heads and state commissioners to ensure cross-talk and resolution of key policy issues.
- Congress must identify and fund a federal champion to coordinate climate change impacts and relocation efforts. The Denali Commission, the Corps of Engineers, the

EPA and FEMA are leaning forward as far as we dare without a clear mission statement from Congress. I applaud Governor Palin’s assignment of the Department of Environmental Conservation as the state lead on these issues.

- We must come forward with innovative, affordable and culturally-appropriate designs, plans and technologies for all relocation efforts. If we simply replicate existing villages and infrastructure in new places, we fail. And that all of us are contributing our share of time, talent and treasure to ensure the burden is shared and our efforts will ultimately succeed.

Thanks to the Forum on the Environment for bringing us together in this important forum on climate change and communities in peril.

