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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-895T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Approximately 6,600 miles of Alaska's coastline and many of the low-lying areas along the state's rivers are subject to severe flooding and erosion. Most of Alaska's Native villages are located on the coast or on riverbanks. In addition to the many federal and Alaska state agencies that respond to flooding and erosion, Congress established the Denali Commission in 1998 to, among other things, provide economic development services and meet infrastructure needs in rural Alaska communities.

This testimony is based on GAO's report, *Alaska Native Villages: Most Are Affected by Flooding and Erosion, but Few Qualify for Federal Assistance* ([GAO-04-142](#), December 12, 2003). Specifically, GAO identified (1) the number of Alaska Native villages affected by flooding and erosion, (2) the extent to which federal assistance has been provided to those villages, (3) the efforts of nine villages to respond to flooding and erosion, and (4) alternatives that Congress may wish to consider when providing assistance for flooding and erosion.

What GAO Recommends

GAO's December 2003 report suggested that Congress consider directing the relevant federal agencies and the Denali Commission to assess the feasibility of alternatives for responding to flooding and erosion.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-895T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

ALASKA NATIVE VILLAGES

Villages Affected by Flooding and Erosion Have Difficulty Qualifying for Federal Assistance

What GAO Found

Flooding and erosion affects 184 out of 213, or 86 percent, of Alaska Native villages to some extent. While many of the problems are long-standing, various studies indicate that coastal villages are becoming more susceptible to flooding and erosion caused in part by rising temperatures.

Small and remote Alaska Native villages have generally not received federal assistance under federal flooding and erosion programs largely because they do not meet program eligibility criteria. Even villages that do meet the eligibility criteria may still not receive assistance if they cannot meet the cost-share requirements for the project.

Of the nine villages that GAO reviewed, four—Kivalina, Koyukuk, Newtok, and Shishmaref—are in imminent danger from flooding and erosion and are planning to relocate, while the remaining five are in various stages of responding to these problems. Costs for relocating are expected to be high.

GAO, other federal and state officials, and village representatives identified alternatives that could increase service delivery for Alaska Native villages. These alternatives include

- expanding the role of the Denali Commission,
- directing federal agencies to consider social and environmental factors in analyzing project costs and benefits,
- waiving the federal cost-sharing requirement for these projects, and
- authorizing the "bundling" of funds from various federal agencies.

Although the Denali Commission and two federal agencies raised questions about expanding the role of the Denali Commission in commenting on GAO's report, GAO still believes it continues to be a possible alternative for helping to mitigate the barriers that villages face in obtaining federal services.

Bluff Erosion at the Native Village of Shishmaref (June 2003)



Source: GAO.