

alaskabeacon.com

Six months after Halong, typhoon survivors tell senators Alaska villages need more than disaster aid

Jenni Monet

9–11 minutes

Testifying before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs about last fall's deadly remnants of Typhoon Halong, Paul J. Paul, Chief of the Native Village of Kipnuk, recalled the moment his six-year-old granddaughter asked the family to sing "Silent Night" — in the dark — as early-morning floodwaters swirled violently around their home.

Lucy Martin, a tribal resilience assistant coordinator for Kwigillingok, listened as she dabbed her eyes dry. Earlier that day, she described graves and caskets unearthed by the storm rolling outside her window as her home broke free from its foundation and floated away. "It was a real-life horror movie for me," she said.

Over two days of field hearings in Anchorage and Bethel, storm survivors from the hard-hit villages of Kipnuk and Kwigillingok offered a rare, emotional account of the fear and lingering hardships linked to the October 12 storm that killed at least one, left two others missing and displaced residents of both communities. Tribal leaders and policy officials used the hearings

to urge Congress to rethink how federal agencies handle disaster recovery in rural Alaska.



Lucy Martin, a tribal resilience assistant coordinator from Kwigillingok, testified that Typhoon Halong was “a real-life horror story” for her. May 5, 2026. (Photo by Jenni Monet/Alaska Beacon)

Only Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska and chair of the committee, attended the hearings on behalf of the Senate panel. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Billy Kirkland also participated in the discussions alongside Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, who joined the first day of testimony in Anchorage.

“I know that this is not easy,” Murkowski told survivors Tuesday. “We’re here to better understand the impacts of Typhoon Halong, how the federal response worked, where it fell short, and what we need to do together as we move forward.”

No one wants to move back to Kipnuk, the tribal administrator, Rayna Paul said, as she spoke of the destruction and

contamination that claimed 90% of village infrastructure. “Our lands have been forever changed by these disasters,” Paul said. “We are no longer safe there.”

Kipnuk has endured three federally declared disasters in just 37 months, each more destructive than the last. Viewing Typhoon Halong as a warning of what lies ahead, both Kipnuk and Kwigillingok — with a combined population of about 1,000 people — have voted overwhelmingly to relocate to higher ground.

But Wednesday’s hearing in Bethel exposed what tribal leaders have warned about for decades: The deep flaws in the federal government’s disaster recovery system — from delayed housing aid and fragmented funding programs to the absence of any formal framework for responding to climate-threatened villages.



Rayna Paul, tribal administrator and environmental director for Kipnuk, testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, in Anchorage on May 5, 2026, urging federal lawmakers to support long-term relocation

efforts for climate-threatened Alaska Native villages. (Photo by Jenni Monet/Alaska Beacon)

“The status quo is not sustainable,” Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium President and CEO Natasha Singh said, testifying how communities are often left navigating multiple agencies with overlapping rules and unclear authority—all while simultaneously responding to disaster impacts. “For the people we serve, the existing approach is unacceptable.”

Similar concerns were raised by leaders from the Association of Village Council Presidents, the Calista Corporation, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation and the Denali Commission.

Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Billy Kirkland highlighted a recently announced \$20 million emergency package from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, including \$4 million for immediate fuel, water and firewood assistance in 16 Western Alaska villages and \$16 million for erosion and infrastructure work in Chefnak.

But questions remained about the status of the BIA’s Tribal Climate Resilience Program, which was renamed the Branch of Tribal Community Resilience by the second Trump administration. The grant initiative represents one of the federal government’s primary funding sources for tribal climate adaptation and migration planning since its creation in 2011.

One tribal administrator taking in the talks, Noelle George from Akiachak, told the Alaska Beacon that roughly \$250,000 in erosion mitigation funding awarded during the Biden administration had yet to be distributed under President Trump.

Kirkland, who was confirmed in October, did not directly address the resilience grants during the hearings despite repeated

references to it by witnesses. It also remains unclear whether any new funding has been awarded to any new recipients during Trump's second term. During his first, the administration unsuccessfully sought to eliminate the funding program altogether.

Bryan Fisher, director of Alaska's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, described Typhoon Halong as the most catastrophic disaster he has seen in 32 years, and warned that federal funding disruptions and staffing shortages have created new obstacles in the recovery process.

"FEMA is hard to work with," Fisher said bluntly during a question-and-answer session following Wednesday's hearing.



Bryan Fisher, Alaska's top emergency management official, warned lawmakers that federal disaster systems are struggling to keep pace with increasingly severe storms in rural Alaska. May 6, 2026. (Photo by Jenni Monet/Alaska Beacon)

He added that furloughs and delays within the Department of Homeland Security slowed reimbursements and recovery planning. On April 29, FEMA implemented [Immediate Needs Funding](#), limiting spending to only the most urgent, life-saving measures amid the partial government shutdown.

Still, FEMA said in a [six month recovery update](#) that the agency and the state had distributed more than \$60 million in individual and public assistance funds tied to Typhoon Halong recovery efforts, including housing assistance, infrastructure repair and debris removal.

In a press conference afterward, Murkowski confirmed that some disaster recovery funds tied to Halong had been stalled in Washington awaiting approvals while DHS funding remained unresolved.

The strain of those delays emerged in the case of Rayna Paul, whose FEMA appeal reviewed by the Alaska Beacon showed the agency denied her request for continued housing assistance after determining her living expenses did not exceed 30% of household income. The denial suggested Paul had achieved some degree of financial and housing stability.

But that stood in stark contrast to her testimony, Tuesday, when she described displaced families in Anchorage facing looming evictions, suicides, depression, bullying in schools and deep cultural isolation far from their ancestral villages.

In that sense, Paul's denial represented a broader concern raised throughout the hearings: that federal disaster assistance formulas often fail to reflect the realities facing Alaska Native families living on the frontlines of climate change.

As relocation plans slowly take shape, Paul urged lawmakers to support an interim village where displaced families could remain connected to their homelands, while also establishing a federal pilot relocation project for climate-threatened Alaska Native communities.



Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, speaks during a Senate Committee on Indian Affairs field hearing on Typhoon Halong recovery efforts in Western Alaska, as Natasha Singh, president and CEO of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortia, listens. May 6, 2026. (Photo by Jenni Monet/Alaska Beacon)

Murkowski said she is already working with other senators on legislation aimed at reforming FEMA and improving disaster response systems. She also suggested Alaska could become a national model for climate-driven community relocation.

But not without tribal consultation and autonomy. The hearings also revealed growing tensions over agencies and contractors failing to communicate directly with tribal leadership in recovery

efforts in Kipnuk and Kwigillingok.

“When you hear the tribal administrator say she learned of what was happening in her community because she saw a picture posted on Facebook, that’s wrong,” Murkowski said.

Tribal self-determination ran as a central theme throughout the hearings, among storm survivors and tribal leaders from across the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. Many stated that the federal government bears a trust responsibility to help Native communities threatened by climate change — particularly in Alaska where federal Indian boarding school policies forced the settlement of tribes now concentrated in some of the state’s most flood-prone danger zones.

For Paul, however, the crisis extends beyond federal policy and agency response. He described how, in his culture, nature is personified — but now storms no longer behave in ways elders recognize.

“Nature is talking to us,” he told the panel. “Remember that nature is stronger than man.”

This post has been updated.

[YOU MAKE OUR WORK POSSIBLE.](#)