



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

## Department of Environmental Conservation

DIVISION OF WATER  
Juneau

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April 12, 2023

Roberta Murphy  
Tribal Administrator  
Chuloonawick Native Village  
PO Box 245  
Emmonak, AK 99581

Dear Tribal Administrator Murphy,

Thank you for your March 28, 2023, letter concerning Village Safe Water (VSW). I understand that you placed a phone call to the Division of Water regarding VSW projects on December 20, 2022, and that my team may not have responded to that phone call. Please accept my apologies for the lack of response – that is unacceptable and not how we typically conduct business. VSW's primary responsibility is to provide support to communities on critical sanitation improvement projects. Consistent and reliable communication is essential to achieving the goals of both VSW and communities. I have addressed this specific issue with my team and reminded them of my expectation and commitment to timely and effective communication. If you encounter another situation where you do not receive a timely response from VSW staff, please reach out directly to me so that I can address your issue/inquiry without delay.

In your March 28, 2023, letter you expressed concern with VSW Operations and Maintenance Best Practices (O&M BP) scoring systems and the lack of progress on projects in Emmonak. I will address each of these.

### **VSW Operations and Maintenance Best Practices**

Historically, the amount of funding available for sanitation improvements in rural Alaska was woefully inadequate to meet all the identified needs. As a result, the funding agencies developed criteria to determine eligibility and priority for the limited resources available. The O&M BP tool was developed over a two-year process involving federal funding partners, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), and the Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) Program within the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development. The O&M BP tool was implemented in 2015 to assess the technical, financial, and managerial capacity of communities and to identify communities that would benefit from assistance from programs such as the Remote Maintenance Worker (RMW) and RUBA.

While water and sewer infrastructure is critically important and provides a means for improved safety and sanitary conditions for the rural residents of the communities, the ability to operate and maintain the facility is equally important for the ongoing safety of the residents and

sustainability of the community. The O&M Best Practices tool remains a critical component to evaluate a community's capacity in that regard, and to identify ways to assist the community for their ongoing success.

In the past, VSW required communities to maintain a minimum O&M BP score throughout the life of project funded through the Capital Improvement Project program; however, this is no longer a requirement. Once a project is funded, it will continue to completion regardless of the community's O&M BP score. However, technical, financial, and managerial capacity is critical to the long-term sustainability of sanitation facilities and we continue to encourage communities to work on these during the life of the project. There are many resources available to provide communities assistance, including through the RMW, RUBA, and Capacity Development Programs.

### **Projects in Emmonak**

Projects in all communities were impacted in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the "shelter in place" and travel restrictions began to lift, many projects were further impacted due to supply chain delays and significant increases in material costs that required VSW to seek additional funding to ensure the full project scope could be completed.

Despite these challenges, there has been a lot of work on projects in Emmonak and the other communities you mentioned:

- In 2020, VSW completed service to ten homes.
- In 2022, service lines and indoor plumbing for five more homes were completed.
- VSW has contracted an engineering firm to design water and sewer main extensions and service to an additional five homes; that design effort is currently underway.
- A new water treatment plant is also in the design phase.
- VSW is currently working to secure a contractor to complete the new water intake project and funding has recently been secured to design and construct a new water storage tank.
- VSW has secured a consultant to design the Phase 9 Water and Sewer project for Marshall and is working to finalize funding agreements for projects in Alakunuk to develop a new surface water intake and provide service to communities across the river.

I appreciate that it may be difficult to see the work that VSW is accomplishing on behalf of the communities until construction activities begin, but please be assured that VSW is diligently working to move these projects forward as quickly as possible so that the residents can benefit from the critical health improvements they are meant to provide.

Recently, our team did reach out to the City of Emmonak, as well as other communities supported by VSW, to understand additional project needs for which funding should be sought. Additionally, the project manager assigned to assist Emmonak has been in direct contact with individual homeowners that are seeking piped service and he is working to determine the most appropriate means of securing funding to meet these needs. If there are additional needs for the community, we do want to work collectively to identify and document them so that we can assist the community in securing funding.

Tribal Administrator Murphy  
April 12, 2023

Thank you for raising your concerns with VSW. Your communication is appreciated, gave me the opportunity to remind staff of my expectation and commitment to timely and effective communication, and allowed me to share important information on progress for Emmonak projects. If you have additional concerns or thoughts regarding VSW, please let me know – I am willing and interested in discussing how we can better support your community in its efforts to provide safe and sustainable drinking water and wastewater disposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R. Bates'.

Randy Bates  
Director

cc: The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, United States Senate  
The Honorable Dan Sullivan, United States Senate  
The Honorable Mary Peltola, United States House of Representatives  
The Honorable Donny Olson, Alaska State Senator  
The Honorable Neal Foster, Alaska State Representative  
Jason Brune, Commissioner, Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation