

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

March 15, 2022

8:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Tiffany Zulkosky, Chair  
Representative Dan Ortiz  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Geran Tarr  
Representative Mike Cronk

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): RURAL WASTEWATER AND SANITATION

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JULIE SANDE, Commissioner Designee  
Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-provided a PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

JASON BRUNE, Commissioner  
Department of Environmental Conservation  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-provided a PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

CARRIE BOHAN, Facilities Program Manager  
Division of Water  
Department of Environmental Conservation  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Co-provided a PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

ALBERTA UNOK, President and CEO  
Alaska Native Health Board  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint presentation on ANHB's role related to the Presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

BRIAN LEFFERTS, Director of Public Health  
Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Water & Wastewater in Rural Alaska," during the presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

FRANCINE MORENO, Manager of Utility Operations  
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint during the presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:03:15 AM](#)

**CHAIR TIFFANY ZULKOSKY** called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Ortiz, and Zulkosky were present at the call to order. Representatives Tarr and Fields arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **PRESENTATION(S): Rural Wastewater and Sanitation**

[8:03:53 AM](#)

CHAIR ZULKOSKY announced that the only order of business would be a Presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation.

[8:04:56 AM](#)

JULIE SANDE, Commissioner Designee, Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED), co-provided a PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation. She provided introductory remarks.

CARRIE BOHAN, Facilities Program Manager, Division of Water, Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), co-provided a

PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation [hard copy included in the committee packet]. Village Safe Water's (VSW) goal was to assist communities in realizing health benefits from improved sanitation by building sustainable utilities. VSW received \$70 million in annual funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development with a required 25 percent match. DEC administered the funding and supported 70 communities in implementing the infrastructure projects. States were obligated to ensure that public water systems are equipped with adequate financial, technical, and managerial capacity, otherwise known as "capacity development," per the Safe Drinking Water Act. The USEPA delegated primacy of drinking water regulations to DEC. DEC and DCCED implemented the Remote Maintenance Worker (RMW) program and the Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) program to specifically address capacity development. Operations and Maintenance Best Practices were developed through a two-year collaborative effort between DEC, RUBA, and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC). She detailed the scoring system assessment system used for VSW and other projects' funding eligibility. In response to committee questions, she explained that as the lead agency, DEC assigned an engineer to each community who was responsible for documenting sanitation needs in the Indian Health Service (IHS) Sanitation Deficiency System (SDS) database, assisting with funding applications, and overseeing the implementation of projects. IHS funding did not require a state match; however, many projects were ineligible for that funding source, for which VSW funding was a likely candidate.

JASON BRUNE, Commissioner, Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), co-provided a PowerPoint presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation. In response to committee questions, he described the remote maintenance workers as the "heroes of Alaska" for doing the difficult job of restoring generators and water systems to rural Alaska in minus 30-degree weather. He explained that the "easy" communities had already been serviced; however, there were 30 more "difficult" communities left unserved. In those remaining communities, the average cost of hooking up each home [to a water system] was between \$600,000 and \$800,000. The Sewer and Water Challenge was a collaborative project between the University of Alaska (UA) and the USEPA that looked for affordable systems for processing water and wastewater.

[9:01:55 AM](#)

ALBERTA UNOK, President/CEO, Alaska Native Health Board (ANHB), gave a PowerPoint presentation on ANHB's role in rural wastewater and sanitation. Established in 1968, the ANHB was the statewide advocacy voice for the Alaska Tribal health system. Water and sanitation had been a longstanding priority for the board. The United Nations recognize access to clean drinking water and sanitation as an essential human right. ANHB had worked for decades to achieve funding to reduce barriers for communities to receive piped water systems. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, ANHB knew that the limited access to clean water and sanitation represented a risk factor for rural communities, which already suffered from higher rates of respiratory diseases due to the lack of services. Washing hands was not an option for all. The current method of funding distribution supported system barriers and allowed communities with the greatest need to be left out. In December 2020, ANHB passed Resolution No, 01-2020, which called for the removal of Best Practice score for state allocated funding to support projects through the VSW. Federal statute 25 U.S.C. Section 1632 provided precedent for preventing barriers in Native water and sanitation programs. She emphasized that every Alaskan deserved the dignity of access to water and sanitation, and rural communities were no different.

[9:09:39 AM](#)

BRIAN LEFFERTS, Director of Public Health, Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Water & Wastewater in Rural Alaska," during the presentation on Rural Wastewater and Sanitation. He described the service delivery types in the Yukon-Kuskokwim (YK) Delta: honey buckets; small, closed haul systems; and piped systems. To avoid the transmission of "water-washed" diseases, 25 gallons of water per person, per day, was required. The health impacts from a lack of water include increased respiratory disease infections. A 2008 study found that one in three infants in communities without piped water were hospitalized due to respiratory infections. Rates of hospitalization for pneumonia were also 11 times higher in these communities. A recent report found that moving unserved communities in the YK Delta to a fully piped community could prevent over 4,600 illnesses and 60 deaths per year, resulting in an estimated \$7 million per year in avoided healthcare costs and \$586 million per year in mortality risk reduction. Construction was a huge barrier to entry. In the YK Delta alone, there was \$587 million in funding needed to address the dire sanitation condition. Two state policy requirements were preventing the funding from going to projects to address

the most severe sanitation deficiencies in Alaska: the affordability matrix and Best Practice scores. He argued that existing research did not support these metrics for the measure of future sustainability. Best Practices from un-piped communities was a poor predictor of the community's ability to operate a pipe system, he said, while the affordability matrix was an unrealistic measure of a household's willingness to pay for an essential service. He further explained the "catch-22" with Best Practice scores: pipe systems were essential to create an economy of scale for a high score; however, systems need a high score to qualify for funding. In addition, not one of the existing pipe, water, and sewer systems in the YK Delta would have been funded if the affordability matrix were a requirement when they were built. He concluded by emphasizing that health disparities in rural Alaska were unintended consequences of a failure in policy associated with the state's sustainability plan and Best Practice requirements.

[9:26:34 AM](#)

FRANCINE MORENO, Manager of Utility Operations, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTH), gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "ANTHC Presentation on Rural Sanitation Funding" [hard copy included in the committee packet. She pointed out that the lack of water service in many rural communities created extreme challenges in practicing basic COVID-19 prevention techniques. In addition, multiple generations of families living within the same household made it challenging to avoid close contact. Over the next five years, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law would allocate \$3.5 billion to IHS sanitation funding, of which \$1.9 billion was needed to bring a level of sanitation service to the unserved and underserved communities in Alaska. Of the \$1.9 billion, communities would need \$363 million in non-IHS contributions, which could be funded by the Denali Commission or through USDA or USEPA, all of which require a state match. In the first year of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding, Alaska should expect to see \$196 million in funding with approximately \$24 million in contributions. Failure to meet Best Practice criteria could make communities ineligible for the non-IHS grants needed as contributions for the IHS funding. She reiterated that currently, Best Practice scores worked effectively for training, building capacity, and evaluating the understanding of water and sewer operations for newly built or existing infrastructure; however, its use for determining funding eligibility created a barrier to receiving service. Furthermore, nearly all the underserved and unserved communities would be denied funding if the existing affordability index were

used. In conclusion, Ms. Moreno said the Best Practice scores and RUBA program's training efforts were critical for rural communities to understand how to operate and maintain existing and new systems. Nonetheless, she urged the State to discontinue the use of Best Practice criteria and the affordability index to determine a community's funding eligibility.

[10:00:14 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.