

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT MEETING
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

January 29, 2026
8:03 a.m.

DRAFT

MEMBERS PRESENT

HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair
Representative Donna Mears, Co-Chair
Representative Carolyn Hall
Representative Ky Holland
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Steve Clair
Representative Garret Nelson

HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Representative Maxine Dibert, Chair
Representative Ashley Carrick
Representative Robyn Niayuq Frier
Representative Andi Story
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Jubilee Underwood

MEMBERS ABSENT

HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

All members present

HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Representative Justin Ruffridge

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) : ALASKA STATE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER
UPDATE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

BRYAN FISHER, Director
Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management
Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave the Alaska State Emergency Operations Center Update presentation.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:03 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT called the joint meeting of the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee and the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Frier, Shwanke, Underwood, and Dibert, and Representatives Hall, Holland, Prax, St. Clair, G. Nelson, Himschoot, and Mears. Representative Carrick and Story arrived as the meeting was in progress.

[Chair Dibert passed the gavel to Co-Chair Mears.]

PRESENTATION(S): Alaska State Emergency Operations Center Update

[8:05:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the only order of business would be the Alaska State Emergency Operations Center Update presentation.

[8:05:51 AM](#)

BRYAN FISHER, Director, Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management, Department of Military & Veterans' Affairs (DMVA), gave introductory remarks the Alaska State Emergency Operations Center's (SEOC) response to the multiple storms that hit the West Coast and Typhoon Halong, which is the biggest disaster he's experienced in his career. He directed attention to a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Alaska State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) Update" [hard copy included in the

committee file]. He provided a breakdown of the department's organization on slide 2 and the two components of the agency's operations on slide 3: the SEOC, which is the central coordination for all state emergency management and the primary conduit to Federal agencies; and response staff, who assist with initial damage assessment and help communities draft local disaster declaration requests for state assistance, as well as coordinate state and federal agencies. He outlined the response process, as illustrated by the graphic on slide 4, reporting that in 2025, SEOC responded to approximately 130 incidents, but not all were declared a state disaster. On average, there is one state disaster declared per month, totaling about 12-13 per year. The remaining incidents often involve connecting local jurisdictions with a state agency or non-governmental organization (NGO), such as the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), and local health corporations. In the winter, many incidents are related to local utility disruptions. The majority of incidents that SEOC responds to do not require a state disaster declaration or legislative request for funding. He noted that the governor's supplemental budget includes \$40 million for the Disaster Relief Fund, which funds all SEOC activities, as well as repair/restoration to state declared disasters. The proposed budget [for fiscal year 2027 (FY 27)] includes \$24 million in unrestricted general funds (UGF). In response to a question from Representative Mears, he shared additional examples of incidents that do not elevate to a state declared disaster, such as utility disruptions, fuel shortages, assistance with drinking water programs, and hiccups with generators and power plants. In southeast, there's been an increased frequency of landslides, which are often handled locally and have not impacted homes or built infrastructure. He characterized his agency as the "state rolodex" for incidents that do not rise to the level of a state declared disaster, as they can connect and coordinate communities with the appropriate resources.

[8:18:28 AM](#)

MR. FISHER, in response to a question from Chair Dibert about Tribal community prevention and education, stated that they offer rural resilience workshops - two in the past two years - to help communities understand what to do when disaster strikes. They also help with small community emergency response plans to help with preparedness, which has shown to be impactful, especially in rural Alaska.

[8:21:42 AM](#)

MR. FISHER in response to a series of committee questions, said communities in unorganized boroughs require a local level of emergency management. He added that SEOC works with Tribal governments or community councils for unincorporated areas. He commended the Division of Forestry and Fire Protection, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), making their expertise in incident command and emergency response available to SEOC to support areas that lack local governance. He noted that his agency is composed of 64 positions, of which 55 are filled, so he relies on other state agency and partners to force multiply. He explained that there are communities referred to as "frequent flyers" that have similar issues on an annual basis - often utility related. Frequent conversations are had with statewide agencies to discuss the root cause of these issues, which are typically related to training, workforce development, and financial management of utilities. He added that school districts are often the real heroes in these situations because they loan fuel and offer their facilities as shelter. He said many incidents are preventable with good maintenance, planning, and preparedness practices. The resilience workshops offer practical information on infrastructure, schools, Tribal facilities, and utilities, and their preparedness and resiliency ability. Mr. Fisher agreed that disasters start and end with local government. With regard to wildfire preparedness, the Division of Forestry and Fire Protection through their Firewise program encourages folks to make defensible space around their homes. He noted that SEOC has similar programs for community emergency response teams that allow for individual/family preparedness activities to be conducted. He said if people can take care of themselves, it's one less person for the state to worry about. He reported that there has been a slow erosion of federal funding and recalled the Citizen Core Program, which targeted individual, family, and neighborhood resiliency, and became unfunded around 2010.

[8:33:04 AM](#)

MR. FISHER, in response to further committee questions, agreed that schools are the hub when disaster strikes, especially in rural areas, as most were built with resiliency in mind. He named Kipnuk and Kwigillingok as two communities that were built to a higher elevation to survive flood water and maintain power, heat, and service until evacuations were organized. He explained that when a state or federal disaster is declared, funding school districts can be eligible for reimbursement

through the state disaster program. Usage fees are also paid for excessive use and damages are reimbursable by the state or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). When the governor declares a state disaster, 100 percent of the eligible costs are funded by the state and repairs and restoration of public, Tribal, and home infrastructure are reimbursable up to the statutory limit. If costs exceed the state's capacity, there is a 25/75 percent cost share with FEMA reimbursing the 75 percent of eligible expenses. He noted that Alaska receives an unusually high amount of declared disasters based on the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act resulting in additional federal funding to support the restoration and rebuilding of communities. He emphasized that the governor must declare a disaster to access the Disaster Relief Fund. Often, local communities have reserves or contingency funds that can be accessed by declaring a local disaster. He shared the example of frozen pipes in Northwest Arctic Borough, which will be repaired via contingency funds to address utility disruption.

[8:41:56 AM](#)

MR. FISHER resumed the presentation on slide 5 and detailed the two programs that are utilized when a disaster is declared: the Public Assistance program, which offers grants to repair public infrastructure and essential utilities, and the Individual Assistance program, which offers grants to repair/replace private property. He explained that the [Stafford Act] stipulates a financial limitation for grants to repair or replace private property. The financial cap is half the federal amount so this year, FEMA can provide \$44,800 per homeowners and an additional \$44,800 for essential personal property and subsistence equipment loss, and SEOC can provide half of that at \$22,400 when a state disaster is declared. Alaska is the only state in the nation that offers a program like this, as every other state relies on homeowner insurance or FEMA. There is also a temporary housing program that provides free months of rental assistance for temporary relocation, and for homeowners that lose their primary residence, funding for up to 18 months at a rental until the home is repaired or replaced. In response to a series of committee questions, he clarified that the program is available to everyone, but insurance is paid out first. However, SEOC will pay the deductible and anything above the policy limits for residential homes, as well as municipal or Tribal infrastructure that is insured. He acknowledged that severity matters and confirmed that the damage must be widespread and caused by a weather event, for example. When the program is invoked, SEOC is filling in the gaps or providing the

only source of support for homeowners without home insurance. He said the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) fair market rate is used [when providing emergency rental housing] on a studio or 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom homes. He added that his agency has the ability to surpass HUD's fair market rate up to 125 percent depending on market conditions.

8:50:57 AM

MR. FISHER continued to slide 6, which detailed the public assistance and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) project eligibility. He explained that when the governor authorizes a disaster, immediate up-front funding from the Disaster Relief Fund can be accessed up to \$1 million. Anything above \$1 million requires legislative approval. Although the process may seem slow, eligibility must be verified via the FEMA Public Assistance Policy Program Guide to stay consistent with federal regulation before reimbursement is made. He said entities are expected to pay costs upfront to restore infrastructure, and the documentation threshold for reimbursement is heavy to ensure that eligibility is met, per Legislative Budget and Audit Committee and the U.S. Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) standards. He emphasized that due diligence cannot be waived. ON slide 7, he summarized details of Individual Assistance Program, per 6 AAC 94, reiterating that the program must be activated by the governor, and it is not invoked regularly.

8:55:08 AM

MR. FISHER described the photos on slides 8-16, which depicted scenes from the annual River Watch Program; Southeast flooding and landslides; large weather events, like wildfires, snowfall, volcanos, and earthquakes, and Typhoon Halong. He speculated that the impact of atmospheric rivers is a trend that will not be going away anytime soon, so preparation is necessary. He discussed the Mendenhall Glacier flood event in Juneau, which unlike typical disasters, has become predictable and will continue to grow each time the basin releases. He applauded the relationship between CBJ and the Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, characterizing the two entities as "tied at the hip" with regard to disaster response. He explained that this partnership is one that he models to other Tribal entities around the state when exemplifying disaster preparedness, response, and recovery between neighbors. In response to a series of questions, he agreed that weather events across the nation tend to be more severe due to the atmospheric rivers. To some degree, more people are living closer to

dangerous areas and there's a problem with aging infrastructure in Alaska, which makes them more vulnerable even if the incident isn't as severe. He noted that the National Weather Service (NWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are becoming more reliable in their ability to forecast big weather events and their impact. He said SEOC continues to rely on scientists and weather services to model predictability, adding that NWS has committed to embedding a full-time weather person at SEOC to provide this service.

[9:09:13 AM](#)

MR. FISHER in response to a series of committee questions, explained that SEOC works with the Division of Community & regional Affairs (DCRA) on long-term community development plans. There is also a complementary plan for communities called the Hazard Mitigation Plan that addresses specific community concerns, that aligns with the Division of Forestry and Fire Protection's community wildfire protection plans, which address things like fuel reduction for the wildfire threat, and are complementary with a long-term development plan. There is no statewide hazard mitigation program, however, and the federal funding through FEMA for this type of planning is gone with the programs, like the pre-disaster program called Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, being terminated last spring. He noted that President Trump denied a request from Governor Dunleavy for the Federal Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in response to Typhoon Halong. Consequently, there is no federal mitigation funding available at present for CY 25 and CY 26. He relayed that he's heard of a new mitigation program, but it's unclear what federal emergency management will look like in the future, especially as FEMA has been under intense scrutiny with the creation of a review council. He said communities that participate in the National Flood Insurance Program have fairly good data on flooding. FEMA, via DCRA, manages a program called Risk MAP, which provides mapping to identify the extent of potential storm surges or flood heights, but this high fidelity is not available for every community. Referring to slide 11, he noted that there was no base flood elevation data for Kipnuk or Kwigillingok because they are not part of the National Flood Insurance Program, so FEMA is on site now attempting to determine this data to prepare for future coastal storm surge disasters. He reiterated that the local hazard mitigation plans offer strategies to mitigate against threats and hazards, but often it's at great expense to relocate infrastructure.

[9:18:55 AM](#)

MR. FISHER, in response to committee questions, clarified that preparedness and response planning with local jurisdictions asks that communities be ready to take care of themselves for the first 24 of 96 hours because it takes time to mobilize resources. He opined that communities are increasingly more prepared and incident command systems are becoming more common within communities. He noted that there are very few fatalities resulting from Alaska disasters, which is a direct result and testament to the capabilities of local and Tribal responses. He clarified that it's not SEOC's job to regulate fuel tanks; nonetheless, there are known mechanisms to protect bulk fuel tank farms, which are often built with dual purpose: to protect from damage, and to contain potential releases. So by in large, bulk fuel storage in communities are built with resilience and mitigation in mind, especially those that have been refurbished. He added that the U.S. Coast Guard has funded a program that offers assistance and analyses on how to better protect bulk fuel storage, and there are opportunities to add resilience and rebuild stronger, higher, and safer, from a myriad of agencies. He stated that subsistence camps are eligible for reimbursement under both FEMA and state Individual Assistance Programs; however, the cabin structure itself - the real property - is only eligible for reimbursement from the state up to \$22,400, but not from FEMA. Alternatively, equipment, such as boats, fishing, tackle, guns, and other subsistence equipment is eligible. Mr. Fisher confirmed that he intends to retire this fall after 32 years of service. He said his team offers a great workplace culture and tends to retain its employees. He did not know who would be replacing him upon retirement.

[9:36:16 AM](#)

MR. FISHER discussed the remnant of Typhoon Halong and the West Coast storm disaster in the Northwest Arctic Borough - referred to as DR disaster 4893 by the federal government. He applauded the heroic efforts of members of the Alaska National Guard and U.S. Coast Guard who effected 51 rescues as homes were floating away in these communities, some with people inside. He recalled his experience flying into Kipnuk in November and the devastating impact of the storm.

[9:39:18 AM](#)

MR. FISHER in response to additional committee questions, noted that Typhoon Halong was particularly tricky because the storm

surge was predicted to land somewhere else. He said it's SEOC's policy to support evacuations and preemptive evacuations of medically fragile people, but wholesale evacuation of entire communities are uncommon. Better fidelity on Halong's path and its impact would have allowed SEOC to help support the evacuation sooner. He reiterated that often, it's on the communities themselves to fund preemptive evacuation until a disaster is declared, so there is a cost implication. He offered to follow up on the policies in other states.

[9:46:18 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the joint House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee and House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 9:46 a.m.