

Executive Summary

National Significance - the critical importance of protecting Alaska Native communities and cultures

Today, Alaska Native communities are on the front lines of climate change. These communities are disproportionately impacted by harmful climate-driven environmental trends and extreme events. Alaska Native economic, social, and cultural ways of being, which have served so well for millennia, are now under extreme threat due to accelerated environmental change. The magnitude and severity of this problem can be difficult to comprehend. In jeopardy are not just buildings, but the sustainability of entire communities and cultures.

Alaska Native villages and Alaska Native cultures are a national treasure. Alaska is home to 160,287 Alaska Native people who are members of 229 federally recognized Tribes—forty percent of the federally recognized Tribes in the United States. Alaska Native people are represented by 11 distinct Indigenous cultures and at least 20 Native languages with more than 200 dialects. Nearly half of Alaska Native people live in 200 small, remote communities that are some of the most underserved areas in the nation. Alaska Native people experience greater disparities in social determinants of health than other races for poverty, education, employment, physical environment, and access to health care due to factors including historical discriminatory policies, insufficient resources, and inefficient federal program delivery (USCCR, 2018; ANTHC, 2017). Entrenched disparities in the nation's laws and public policies have often denied equal opportunity to historically underserved communities (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021).

National Significance - a model to prevent disasters nationwide and reduce federal fiscal exposure

144 Alaska Native communities face some degree of infrastructure damage from erosion, flooding, permafrost degradation, or a perilous combination of all three hazards. The magnitude and severity of climate change impacts in Alaska, where air temperatures are rising faster than in any other state, will soon occur in communities throughout the United States. The approaches recommended in this report can serve as a nationwide model to prevent disasters. Developing and testing a collaborative funding allocation method based on risk and a whole-of-government implementation framework in Alaska is transferrable to the contiguous United States. This approach is consistent with GAO recommendations for prioritizing climate resilience investments based on need and implementing a climate migration pilot program (GAO, 2019; GAO, 2020).

Purpose and Origin

The purpose of this report is to help improve the effectiveness of federal and state government support for Alaska communities to address climate and environmental threats. Legislative and programmatic changes are needed to remove barriers faced by small rural communities and to create more effective and equitable systems to deliver resources and services. The intended audience for this report is the U.S. Congress, the White House, and federal and state agency leadership and program managers.