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Initial Assessment of Lead Agency Candidates to Support Alaska Native Villages Requiring Relocation to Survive Climate Harms

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout Alaska’s coastal and river communities, the effects of climate change are imminent threats—not distant projections—for the livelihood of thousands of Alaska Natives. Thirty-one of Alaska’s Native villages are in immediate danger due to flooding and erosion caused by climate change, but few qualify for federal assistance.¹ The villages are largely subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering communities located in remote rural areas with only basic infrastructure. They require relocation assistance from state or federal government agencies, but often do not qualify for existing programs. Existing agency efforts to assist villages are scattered, and currently no agency has the authority to manage a full-scale relocation of a village. This lack of agency leadership and coordination is a major stumbling block in any relocation effort.² If this leadership vacuum is not filled, the threatened Alaska Native villages are likely to receive only haphazard preventative assistance, and the federal government will soon face a much more expensive emergency relocation after flooding, erosion, and storm surges destroy the homes and livelihoods of thousands.

The goal of this report is thus to identify the most appropriate agency or agencies to lead Alaska Native village relocation efforts. A detailed multi-attribute analysis of seven potential lead agencies with experience in relocation efforts was conducted to determine the ideal lead agency. During evaluation, special attention was given to each agency’s past experience working in Alaska and on relocation efforts nationally, its reputation with tribes and Congress, its funding authorization and discretion, its organizational structure and legislative origin, and its relationships with other agencies and private industries related to relocation efforts.

Based on the analysis, this report makes the case for the following agencies to undergo further evaluation for the role of lead agency: (1) U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; (2) Denali Commission; (3) U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Agency; (4) Federal Emergency Management Agency; and (5) U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Although this recommendation is based on a preliminary analysis that does not include critical input from key villages and agencies, or the possibility of significant restructuring of individual agencies, this report aims to further the recommendations of the 2009 GAO

¹ GAO, Alaska Native Villages: Most Are Affected by Flooding and Erosion, but Few Qualify for Federal Assistance, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO-04-142 (Dec. 2003), *available at* <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04142.pdf>.

² “In 2007, the Newtok Planning Group reported that the lack of designated federal and state lead entities to guide, coordinate, and fund assistance impeded village relocation efforts and created uncertainty regarding the fulfillment of environmental analysis requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act,” quoting GAO Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion, Report to Congressional Requestors, GAO-09-551 (June 2009), pp. 12 [hereinafter “GAO Report 2009”].

report that Congress “may want to consider designating, or creating, a lead federal entity that could work in conjunction with the lead state agency to coordinate and oversee village relocation efforts.”³ While further analysis and interviews with affected communities is necessary to make final agency recommendation determinations, the need for new legislation granting authority and appropriations for an agency to take leadership of the Alaska Native village relocation efforts is immediate, clear, and dire.

³ GAO Report 2009, *supra* note 2, at 43.