

Knowles announces new rural sanitation council

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APR 5
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Gov. Tony Knowles has taken steps to maintain momentum in dealing with rural sanitation. Speaking in Bethel on March 31, the governor announced formation of a multi-agency working group to insure adequate sanitation facilities in scores of villages whose community or household systems pose serious health risks.

Rather than documenting the problem, which has already been extensively done through other initiatives, Knowles said the group will build on recent federal-state-Native initiatives to implement sanitation priorities.

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"Across rural Alaska, thousands of people continue to use honey buckets and dump human waste into nearby waters," said Knowles in a prepared statement. "The deplorable conditions are responsible for a massive health crisis which includes hepatitis A, meningitis and dysentery. We must provide safe water and adequate sanitation facilities and I am making the long-term commitment to solve this health and economic crisis with the formation of this council."

The council will be co-chaired by Myron Naneng, head of the Association of Village Council Presidents and Gene Burden, state commissioner of environmental conservation.

"I want every village to leave the honey bucket where it belongs, in the museum," said Knowles.

Although Knowles has requested \$22 million for the state's Village Safe Water program for Fiscal Year 1996, it is unclear what affect the council's formation will have on a conservative, urban-dominated Legislature bent on slashing the administration's budget.

Although the council is intended to build on rather than duplicate previous efforts to advance the rural sanitation agenda, there will be some overlap. According to the governor's office, the new council will:

- survey how northern countries have provided sanitation services in remote areas;
- encourage coordination of resources between private industry, villages, state and federal agencies;
- coordinate school districts and communities so that the costs of water and sewage systems are shared;
- seek long term stable funding for sanitation construction projects; and
- ensure that adopted policies are carried out.

The council will have 18 members appointed for three years from a wide range of political, technical,

health advocacy and Native groups.

"We support and commend the Knowles Administration for this important action," said Jeanine Kennedy, executive director of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program. "We applaud the inclusion of rural people on the Council, as well, which is most important."

Kennedy suggested it was important for the council to be well-briefed on previous and current sanitation improvement efforts.

"It would be helpful, too, to have a status report on what has occurred in rural Alaska in regard to implementation of safe water systems and

adequate sewage disposal sites. A lot of study has been done, and now is the time to implement."

According to the governor's office, outbreaks of infectious waterborne disease are still common in rural Alaska. Approximately 74 percent of the state's rural communities have sanitation facilities which have been assessed by the federal government as inadequate. A concept paper said the new council should review progress in the implementation of sanitation recommendations made by the Alaska Science and Technology Foundation, develop a continuing action

plan, coordinate state agency efforts and continue pressing the federal

government to keep its promise to help address the problem.
