

Congressional agency views rural sanitation crisis

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

ANCHORAGE—Native health advocates told congressional investigators last week that extraordinary efforts will be required to resolve Alaska's rural sanitation crisis. In the meantime, people continue to sicken and die.

"In the past year (in our region) we had a couple of deaths associated with poor sanitation," said John Schaeffer, director of business development for NANA Corp., the regional Native corporation based in Kotzebue. "We have people dying for lack of proper sanitation and this has been going on. Although a lot of good has been done, there's been scattered commitment."

Schaeffer deplored a destructive tendency for rural villages to depend on government agencies

for solutions to problems largely created by government policies in the first place.

"We hold our hand out, we wait, and we die. I'm not trying to lay blame here. That's the situation in rural Alaska," Schaeffer said.

A first-hand look

Native representatives and government bureaucrats were summoned to review the history and status of rural Alaska's sanitation crisis for the Office of Technology Assessment, a congressional research agency which sent a two-man team to Alaska last week to tour villages and collect first-hand information on the problem, and to identify ways that technology could be brought to bear. *

A multitude of related problems in providing potable water and safely disposing of sewage

Congressional office reviews sanitation . . .

Continued from page 1
plague scores of Alaskan villages. They range from systems too expensive or complex to maintain to broken-down facilities and communities with only honey-bucket disposal carried with varying degrees of sophistication.

While a consensus approach to handling the issue has been elusive, Native and government analysts agree that lack of grassroots village involvement in system design, capital funding lapses and insufficient funds and training for operation and maintenance have made a difficult situation much worse.

Anne Walker, executive director of the Alaska Native Health Board, agreed, noting that comparisons between some village circumstances and those found in developing countries are accurate and unavoidable.

"We've been talking about this for a long time, but we really haven't made a concerted effort to solve the problem," said Walker. "In rural Alaska, we have Third World sanitation. That's unacceptable in Alaska."

A growing frustration

Orie Williams, executive vice president of the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corp. of Bethel expressed the frustration of many health professionals and village residents when confronted by the ignorance or indifference of urban residents and their legis-

lators who balk at the price tag for dealing with the sanitation problem.

"I get real tired of hearing 'These people can't afford something better.' That's right, these people can't

afford something better," said Williams. "It's going to be a subsidy situation for a long time. These are American citizens and they deserve nothing less than the rest of us."

Williams said it is commonplace for state and federal bureaucrats to come to a community, present a short list of options for providing sewer and water and asking them to choose one from the list without any further consultation, without developing options based on local input.

"The people in the communities know what will work in their villages given the opportunities," Williams said.

Some of the agency representatives at the meeting made it clear they were trying to move in the direction of greater local emphasis on solutions.

"If we're going to ask municipal governments to assume the responsibility, we have to be sure the technology as appropriate to the local situation," said Mike Black, specialist project supervisor for the Alaska Dept. of Community and Regional Affairs. "There has to be local involvement to develop these answers."

Too much engineering?

The tremendous challenge of providing safe, workable and cost-effective sewer and water facilities to more than 200 remote rural villages was acknowledged by all of the presenters at the briefing. Although most were restrained in their analysis of how the challenge became a crisis, some crucial differences emerged regarding both the history and the future of the problem.

Public Health Service spokesmen fessed up to some of their agency's past errors in planning and design, but weighed in on the side of better management and engineering as a preferred solution.

"I think we're in a misfire situation here with the honey bucket hauling system," said James Crum, director of environmental health for the Alaska Area Native Health Service. "People don't like the honey bucket, and we don't," but it needs to be improved before it's replaced, he said.

Some speakers asserted that running water is both attainable and desirable for every village, while others said possible non-engineering solutions have long been overlooked.

NANA's John Schaeffer, whose company is testing a new sewage disposal system for possible bush distribution, said removing constraints that keep people tied to villages would be a

culturally-viable solution in some cases. He noted that many of Alaska's aboriginal peoples moved freely about their homelands in pursuit of livelihood before government policies began to force creation of settlements which tend to concentrate and magnify a host of social, economic and environmental problems.

"You look at these communities, and we didn't get there by ourselves. The reason we're there is because you forced us to be there," said Schaeffer.

Allowing people to move out from communities might require changes in everything from education delivery to land management policies, but could be feasible and could produce substantial benefits, including long-term cost-savings, Schaeffer suggested.

Stevens calls in OTA

According to Bob Niblock, of OTA's oceans and environment program, the fact-finding mission was the result of a request by Sen. Ted Stevens for an examination of ways that new or existing technology could be utilized to improve rural water and sanitation delivery.

Niblock said Stevens is expecting a 40-50 page report with recommendations by late September or early October. Besides Niblock, the team included project director German Reyes, who will actually draft the report.

Niblock said he expects Stevens

will use the forthcoming OTA report to sensitize his colleagues during the appropriations process.

Last week's briefing, organized with the aid of the Alaska Science and Technology Foundation, was preceded by a field trip to northwest region villages and was to be followed by a tour of villages in the lower Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area.

The day-long briefing was organized to look at several topics:

- Climate and geography in rural Alaska and the restraints they place on waste sanitation applications;
- Social, economic and cultural issues and how they influence sanitation issues;
- History of past sanitation technology applied in Alaska;
- Operation, maintenance and management issues associated with rural sanitation;
- Related health impacts and concerns;
- Status of state and federal funding for sanitation.

The Office of Technology Assessment became operational in 1974, Niblock said. Its purpose is to conduct studies at the request of standing congressional committees. Oversight for the office, which has a staff of 200, is provided by a board of legislators divided equally between party affiliation and House and Senate membership and led by a rotating chair.