

Written Testimony of Bryan J. Fisher

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Before the

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Field Hearing: *“From Disaster to Resilience: Strengthening Tribal Communities through Federal Response, Mitigation and Relocation Programs”*

I. Introduction

Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the effectiveness of state and federal disaster programs in supporting Tribal communities in Alaska. This testimony builds on my oral remarks and focuses on disaster response, recovery, preparedness, mitigation, and long-term resilience in rural and Tribal communities in Alaska.

II. Hazard Environment in Rural Alaska

Rural Alaska—particularly Western Alaska and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta—faces accelerating and compounding hazards, including:

- Severe Bering Sea storm systems and storm surge
- Coastal erosion threatening community infrastructure and habitability
- Riverine flooding and ice jam events
- Permafrost degradation undermining critical infrastructure

These hazards frequently impact multiple communities at once, producing regional-scale disaster events that exceed the capacity of any single jurisdiction to respond independently.

III. Disaster Response and Recovery: DR-4893 (Typhoon Halong)

The response to federal disaster DR-4893, Typhoon Halong, illustrates both the strengths and limitations of current disaster frameworks under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 5121–5207) (“Stafford Act”) administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Typhoon Halong impacted over 40 communities and Tribes across Western and Southcentral Alaska, requiring:

- Coordinated airlifted supply chains
- Emergency sheltering operations
- Rapid multi-jurisdictional damage assessments
- Large-scale evacuation support under extreme weather conditions

The event resulted in the largest domestic evacuation in Alaska history.

More than 680 individuals representing 178 households were placed in non-congregate sheltering in Anchorage, reflecting the scale of displacement and logistical demands placed on the response system under Stafford Act authorities, including Sections 403 (Essential Assistance), 406 (Public Assistance), and 408 (Individual Assistance).

Recovery remains ongoing. In Southcentral Alaska alone, more than 130 households remain displaced, awaiting permanent housing solutions.

IV. Federal Shutdown Impacts and Recovery Constraints

Multiple shutdowns of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including FEMA, is directly impacting Alaska's ability to advance recovery for survivors of Typhoon Halong. These impacts include delays in:

- Reimbursement processing
- Technical assistance delivery
- Long-term recovery program approvals
- Coordination for housing and infrastructure recovery

These delays have real consequences for families who remain displaced and for communities working to restore essential services.

Additionally, state and local emergency managers are yet to see even their FY25 grant funding let alone FY26. These delays came about due to unexplained reasons by FEMA and DHS, unrealistic and unusual requirements placed on the funding at the last moment that led to multiple lawsuits, and systems unavailability due to the repeated shutdowns.

V. Permanent Housing Construction Delay

The State of Alaska is currently awaiting federal approval of its request for Permanent Housing Construction assistance. This assistance authorized in the Stafford Act for insular States and Territories, may provide home repair and/or construction services where no

alternative housing resources are available and where types of housing assistance FEMA normally provides are unavailable, infeasible, or not cost-effective.

The longer this approval is delayed, the longer survivors will remain displaced from their communities and regions. This prolongs instability, increases costs, and delays the transition from emergency sheltering to long-term recovery. Alaska's uniquely short construction season, constrained by extreme weather, remote logistics, and limited construction resources and capacity, combined with high transportation and labor costs, makes rebuilding significantly more expensive and time-intensive than in the Lower 48.

This issue highlights the importance of timely federal decision-making in post-disaster housing recovery, particularly in remote and high-cost environments.

VI. Alignment of Federal Disaster Frameworks with Rural Alaska

While federal disaster programs are essential, they are not always aligned with rural Alaska realities due to:

- Limited access to impacted communities
- Short construction and response seasons
- Limited local administrative capacity
- Complex regulatory requirements under 44 C.F.R. Parts 206 and 207 which govern federal disaster assistance and concurrent management costs.

These challenges can slow both response and recovery, especially for states like Alaska, despite available federal assistance. One example of how to remedy these complexities would be support for S. 773, the *Disaster Management Modernization Act*. This bill would give states the flexibility needed particularly on the management costs for additional flexibility and scaling across all open disasters. In the 118th Congress, this bill passed the House and fell just short of final passage in the Senate. We hope to see the 119th Congress finish the job.

VII. Lessons from Typhoon Halong and Typhoon Merbok

Recent major disasters highlight several key lessons:

- Interagency coordination has improved but remains fragmented at the program level
- Communities must navigate multiple federal funding streams independently
- Misaligned timelines between programs delay recovery and mitigation
- Administrative complexity remains a barrier for small and remote communities

Improved alignment across federal agencies would significantly improve outcomes.

VIII. State of Alaska Disaster Assistance Programs

After decades of confronting frequent and severe disasters, Alaska has built a strong track record of state-led recovery. The State of Alaska leads the nation in its ability to supplement federal disaster programs with state-funded assistance. Mirroring FEMA, the State provides its own state-led programs:

Individual Assistance Program

- Provides grants up to 50% of the FEMA Individual Assistance maximum award

Public Assistance Program

- Covers 100% of infrastructure repair under a state disaster declaration, or
- Covers 100% of the non-federal cost share under a federal disaster declaration

These programs are designed to reduce financial barriers and accelerate recovery in small and remote communities and are applicable to both municipal and Tribal governments. Still, the scale and persistence of impacts continue to outpace available state resources, underscoring the need for more consistent and robust federal support.

IX. Preparedness and Mitigation Investment

Strengthening resilience requires sustained investment in mitigation under:

- Stafford Act Section 203 (Pre-Disaster Mitigation)
- Stafford Act Section 404 (Hazard Mitigation Grant Program)

Federal improvements should focus on:

- Simplifying application processes. This could be done through S. 861, the *Disaster Simplification Act*, which creates a universal disaster application covering assistance from multiple federal agencies.
- Increasing access for small and remote communities
- Reducing administrative burden on Tribal governments

X. Tribal Preparedness Capacity and EMPG Reform

The Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG), authorized under Section 662 of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (6 U.S.C. § 762), provides

critical support to state and local governments but does not include a dedicated Tribal allocation.

A Tribal-specific EMPG program—potentially administered through the Bureau of Indian Affairs—would:

- Expand Tribal preparedness capacity
- Improve access to federal preparedness funding
- Strengthen local emergency management systems

It remains essential that the 229 federally recognized Tribes in Alaska, representing a diverse range of Alaska Native communities across the state, are able to maintain and exercise their sovereignty throughout the mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery disaster management lifecycle.

XI. Denali Commission Role in Rural Resilience

The Denali Commission is an independent federal agency designed to provide critical utilities, infrastructure, and economic support throughout Alaska. The Commission is focused on addressing the state's most persistent challenges, particularly in rural and Tribal communities, where extreme remoteness, high costs, and limited local capacity make it difficult to access and effectively utilize traditional federal programs. There is a significant opportunity to strengthen federal coordination by expanding and formalizing the role of the Denali Commission.

Congress should support a more defined interagency leadership role for the Commission in:

- Rural infrastructure resilience planning
- Community facility development
- Disaster recovery coordination
- Long-term relocation and adaptation planning

Strengthening the Commission's statutory role and aligning federal investments through its authorities would reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and ensure infrastructure decisions reflect community priorities in rural Alaska.

XII. Community Relocation

Several Alaska Native communities are actively pursuing relocation due to environmental threats.

Current federal programs, including Stafford Act authorities, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers programs, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development resources, provide partial support but lack coordination across the full relocation lifecycle.

A unified federal relocation framework is needed to:

- Coordinate planning, site selection, and construction
- Streamline funding across agencies
- Reduce delays and cost escalation

XIII. Statewide Emergency Management Coordination

Alaska operates an all-hazards emergency management system consistent with the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, emphasizing:

- Preparedness
- Coordination
- Capability building across all levels of government

In the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, strong Tribal, regional, and state partnerships have proven essential to effective emergency response and recovery operations.

XIV. Conclusion

Alaska's experience demonstrates that effective disaster management requires strong partnerships, coordinated federal and state systems, and sustained investment in preparedness and mitigation.

Improving federal program alignment, addressing delays in recovery approvals, expanding Tribal preparedness capacity, and strengthening coordination through entities such as the Denali Commission will significantly enhance resilience across Alaska's most at-risk communities.