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Testimony for the Record

U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Field Hearing: *From Disaster to Resilience: Strengthening Tribal Communities through Federal Response, Mitigation, and Relocation Programs*

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Chair Murkowski, members of the Committee, and Tribal leaders:

My name is Jocelyn Fenton, Director of Programs for the Denali Commission. The Commission is a federal agency created to support critical infrastructure and economic development across rural Alaska, with a particular focus on communities facing some of the most severe logistical, environmental, and infrastructure challenges in the nation.

We appreciate the Committee's focus on resilience and relocation. In Alaska, resilience is not an abstract policy objective - it is an operational necessity.

Today, I would like to frame these issues through a recent example that demonstrates both the vulnerabilities we face and the opportunities to build smarter systems moving forward.

Lessons from Typhoon Halong

Typhoon Halong underscored just how vulnerable many western Alaska communities remain to sudden and severe weather events.

With roughly one day of warning, around 1,600 people were evacuated by the Alaska National Guard in what many described as a wartime-scale logistical effort. Entire communities faced immediate threats under extraordinarily compressed timelines.

The storm exposed the reality that resilience depends on far more than formal emergency response systems. It depends on whether:

- communications remain functional when conditions deteriorate;
- households are individually prepared for isolation;
- communities have hardened local infrastructure;

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- regional hub communities have sufficient storage, fuel, and supply capacity to support displaced residents; and
- agencies can coordinate rapidly across jurisdictions without procedural friction.

In several affected locations, communications were severely degraded or completely lost during the storm. This created cascading challenges for situational awareness, coordination, and response.

These are some of the most isolated communities in the United States - many operating with limited communications redundancy and weather monitoring capability, often while relying on power-sensitive systems and equipment that must remain operational during extreme events.

This is why infrastructure resilience is inseparable from public safety.

Weather and Communications Infrastructure

One clear lesson from Halong is the critical importance of reliable forecasting and environmental monitoring.

Many western Alaska communities operate with limited weather observation systems despite being located in regions where rapidly changing marine and storm conditions can have immediate life-safety consequences.

We are encouraged by provisions in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 that support weather infrastructure modernization and Automated Weather Observation System upgrades. These investments will improve forecasting, aviation reliability, emergency response planning, and operational decision-making in rural Alaska.

But weather monitoring infrastructure is only one part of the solution.

Communications redundancy, hardened power systems, backup generation, regional fuel security, and resilient transportation access must all work together.

Regional Resilience: The Hub-and-Spoke Model

Halong reinforced the importance of a regional hub-and-spoke resilience model.

When disaster strikes, hub communities become immediate staging grounds for evacuation, sheltering, logistics, medical response, and supply distribution.

That means resilience planning cannot focus solely on individual at-risk communities. It must also strengthen the regional systems that absorb and support displaced populations.

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This includes:

- emergency response centers;
- regional storage capacity for food, fuel, and critical supplies;
- search and rescue coordination capabilities;
- resilient communications infrastructure; and
- flexible facilities that can support both day-to-day operations and surge response.

The Denali Commission's partnership with the Association of Village Council Presidents to design an emergency response center in Bethel and plan a broader network of regional centers reflects this strategy.

These investments are not simply disaster-response assets. They are dual-use infrastructure that supports everyday public safety, economic continuity, and national readiness.

Resilience as National Security

Resilience in rural Alaska is also a national security issue.

Every time emergency resources must be rapidly diverted to respond to preventable infrastructure failures, those assets are unavailable for other strategic missions.

Building resilient systems reduces the need for crisis-driven mobilization.

It preserves operational flexibility during periods of regional or national conflict and strengthens continuity across strategically important Arctic and western Alaska regions.

In Alaska's remote operating environment, infrastructure hardening is not separate from homeland security - it is foundational to it.

Recovery and Learning Forward

The impacts of Halong are still unfolding.

Many residents from devastated communities remain displaced in hub communities as recovery and rebuilding efforts continue.

The Denali Commission continues to monitor these recovery efforts closely alongside our federal, state, Tribal, and regional partners.

While the circumstances are difficult, we are optimistic that important lessons and best practices will emerge from this response.

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Our goal is to help document those lessons and translate them into a practical recovery framework for Alaska - one that can guide future disaster response, improve coordination, identify infrastructure gaps, and accelerate action when the next event occurs.

Because there will be a next event.

The question is whether we will be better prepared when it arrives.

The Denali Commission's Role

The Denali Commission approaches this work pragmatically.

We look to leverage existing projects, identify gaps, resolve conflicts between funding streams or authorities, coordinate across agencies where appropriate, and move projects forward.

Our role is not to duplicate existing efforts.

It is to connect them.

That means identifying where infrastructure investments can serve multiple purposes - community resilience, economic stability, public safety, and strategic readiness - and helping align partners around implementation.

Recommendations

Based on these lessons, we recommend:

- Greater flexibility for proactive resilience investments before disaster strikes;
- Continued investment in weather monitoring, as well as communications modernization;
- Continued support for regional hub preparedness infrastructure;
- Improved federal coordination framework for disasters;
- Documentation and institutionalization of Alaska-specific disaster recovery best practices.

Closing

Typhoon Halong demonstrated both the extraordinary capabilities of our responders and the serious infrastructure vulnerabilities that remain.

It also offered a clear reminder that resilience is built before the storm arrives.

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The Denali Commission remains committed to working with Tribal communities, Congress, and our federal and state partners to ensure Alaska is better prepared for the next disaster - through practical coordination, strategic investment, and a focus on getting things done.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.