

Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (Tlingit & Haida) is the largest federal and state recognized Tribe in Alaska, representing over 35,000 Tribal citizens.

In rural communities, it is hard to fund and train state certified water system operators. Those who do hold water operator certifications tend to take jobs in larger communities that can pay more. This often leads to small community water systems hiring personnel who are inadequately trained for the job. This lack of experience and training becomes apparent as we see frequent boil water notices, main line failures, and pump or purification system malfunctions.

To help prepare for these expected failures, Tlingit & Haida's Tribal Emergency Operations Center (TEOC) has purchased numerous water purification units that can be loaned out to communities in need. These units are limited in the quantity of water that can be purified before servicing. This leads to these units only being used to supply the most vulnerable populations with clean drinking water. Other community members must often gather and boil water on their own.

In the last two years alone, Tlingit & Haida's TEOC has responded with assistance to Saxman, Craig, Angoon, and Hydaburg related to water systems being out of commission. We have provided water purification systems and pallets of bottled water during emergencies. Additionally, the community of Kake had over a 6-month long boil water notice in 2021.

In the face of a rapidly changing climate and on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, rural communities in Alaska should be prioritized to receive the federal funds made available to the State of Alaska for the issuance of low-interest loans for planning, designing, and constructing sanitation and drinking water facilities. Investment should also be made in training local operators. The State of Alaska's existing criterion to determine need has not been updated since 2015 and does not consider the above challenges, including the inflated costs of living.

Luckily, the 2021 bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act has set aside significant hundreds of millions of dollars for the development of sanitation infrastructure in rural Alaska. Tlingit & Haida urges the State of Alaska to prioritize our rural areas, especially those communities off the road system and lacking basic sanitation infrastructure. 95 of 196 communities in Alaska do not meet the minimum threshold for funding through the Village Safe Water Program, and if the state continues to use the "best practices" score to determine eligibility and priority, then it will run the risk of having federal infrastructure (IIJA/BIL) funds expire or be reallocated elsewhere before they can be used to help these communities. How can we expect best practices from a community if their basic need for water is not being met? The State of Alaska must prioritize communities in greatest need.