

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104241](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Erosion, flooding, and thawing permafrost can pose environmental threats to lives and infrastructure in Alaska Native villages. According to the United States Global Change Research Program, climate change is expected to exacerbate these threats. GAO identified 10 federal agencies that administer programs that support Alaska Native village efforts to address and build resilience to environmental threats.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to help Alaska Native villages address environmental threats. This report examines (1) information about environmental threats to Native villages; (2) federal funding provided to address such threats, and actions supported by that funding; and (3) opportunities to better support efforts to build resilience to such threats.

GAO analyzed federal risk information and obligations data from 10 federal agencies for fiscal years 2016 through 2020; reviewed agency documents and other relevant reports; and interviewed agency officials and representatives from selected Alaska Native villages and tribal organizations.

## What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider establishing a coordinating entity to assist Native villages facing environmental threats. GAO is also making eight recommendations, including that seven agencies change programs to reduce barriers that hinder Native villages' accessing federal assistance. Six of these agencies agreed with GAO's recommendations, and the seventh agency stated it agreed with the report's findings.

View [GAO-22-104241](#). For more information, contact Anna Maria Ortiz at (202) 512-3841 or [OrtizA@gao.gov](mailto:OrtizA@gao.gov).

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## ALASKA NATIVE ISSUES

### Federal Agencies Could Enhance Support for Native Village Efforts to Address Environmental Threats

## What GAO Found

More than 70 out of over 200 Alaska Native villages face significant environmental threats from erosion, flooding, or thawing permafrost, according to a 2019 statewide assessment. Consequences from even a moderate flood or increasing erosion could be significant (see fig.), and over one-third of these communities face the compounding effects of more than one threat. According to several federal officials, short-term actions are needed to address the most urgent threats without waiting for additional studies. At the same time, many Native villages also need more information to support longer-term planning.

#### Erosion-Damaged Road in the Native Village of Shishmaref



Source: Kawerak, Inc. | GAO-22-104241

Federal agencies provided a total of about \$391 million in obligations in fiscal years 2016 through 2020 to (1) repair damaged infrastructure in Alaska Native villages; and (2) build their resilience to environmental threats, including by implementing protection measures. However, since more than one-third of highly threatened Native villages did not receive such federal assistance during these 5 years, significant work remains to protect these communities.

Opportunities exist for federal agencies to better support Alaska Native village efforts to build resilience to environmental threats by improving coordination among federal, state, and tribal entities. Federal agencies coordinate in several targeted ways, including on a per-project basis, but do not systematically coordinate to address these threats statewide. Broader coordination efforts have been limited because of agencies' focus on their own projects and the absence of consistent federal support for interagency coordination. Establishing an interagency and intergovernmental coordinating entity could facilitate more strategically targeted federal investments that more effectively address the threats facing Alaska Native villages.

Further, GAO reviewed 20 programs across federal agencies and found they each had at least one characteristic that could pose an obstacle to villages' obtaining assistance, such as project cost-share requirements. Implementing changes to address those obstacles that are established in agency regulations or policy, where feasible and appropriate, could help Native villages better obtain federal assistance.