

Newtok Relocation Project - Environmental Assessment Scoping

Background and Introduction

Newtok is increasingly vulnerable to bank erosion along the Ninglick River and from coastal storm flooding. In 2003, the Village Council secured land from the US Fish and Wildlife Service at Mertarvik on Nelson Island to relocate Newtok. The Newtok Planning Group was formed in 2006 and various studies and plans have been underway to move the Village, these are generally outlined in the *Strategic Management Plan – Newtok to Mertarvik* (2012). More specific plans have also been completed, these and much more information are on the AK Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development's website: <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/dcra/PlanningLandManagement/NewtokPlanningGroup.aspx>.

Development at Mertarvik to date includes: a barge landing, a quarry, an access road, an evacuation center foundation, storage buildings, three houses, and limited utilities including a water well, bulk fuel storage, a wastewater septic system. To help further the 'pioneering phase' at Mertarvik, the Village Council applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funding, which is matched and administered by the State of Alaska, Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (DHS&EM). The Newtok Village Council also has transportation funding available from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for use at Mertarvik. Before these federal funds can be used, federal environmental review must be completed.

Why is an Environmental Assessment (EA) required and what is it?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and related laws and executive orders, require federal agencies to review impacts to the natural and human environment to help decision-making before taking a federal action (e.g. funding). This evaluation is done through preparing an EA. An EA documents environmental impacts of a proposed project and its alternatives, as well as determines if a more in depth analysis is needed. The EA describes the existing environment, explains the environmental effects of the proposed project and its alternatives, and identifies ways to avoid significant impacts to the environment. The EA concludes with either a determination that the project does not significantly impact the environment or that a more detailed analysis is needed with an Environmental Impact Statement. Preparation of an EA includes public involvement, and begins with 'scoping'.

What is the NEPA scoping process?

Scoping is the first step in the environmental review process and is intended to better inform the content of the EA. During this process federal funding agencies gather information available about the project area, and invite public and agency feedback about: a project's purpose and need, alternatives to addressing that purpose and need; and natural and cultural resources, and

social/community issues that may be particularly impacted by proceeding with the alternatives. Scoping includes a public comment period (30 days) and can include public meetings.

The public, agencies, and interested parties are invited to comment on the following:

What is the purpose and need for the Newtok Relocation Project?

The purpose of the Project is to avoid or reduce damage to property and reduce life safety risks from riverine erosion and potential flooding in Newtok. The Project is needed because of Newtok’s increasing vulnerability to erosion from the Ninglick River and flooding from storm surges, as evidenced from past damages and erosion forecasts. If nothing is done, erosion and flooding will continue to damage infrastructure, utilities, residential and other structures in Newtok; as well as the wellbeing of residents.

Alternatives Considered:

NEPA requires a range of alternatives to addressing the purpose and need be evaluated, including no action, what is proposed, and other proactive solutions.

What is the No Action Alternative?

The No Action Alternative is required and included as a comparison for proactive solutions, in this case no FEMA or BIA funds would be provided to support relocation efforts.

What is the Newtok Relocation Project (Proposed Alternative)?

The Village Council is proposing to use FEMA HMGP funds to move 12 homes from Newtok to Mertarvik and BIA transportation funds for road construction at Mertarvik to support these homes. For occupancy of the homes at Mertarvik, the Project also includes the following with funding from other sources:

- retrofits to the existing water well and septic system
- installation of individual house generators and bulk fuel storage
- developing a Small Community Emergency Response Plan
- purchase of a skiff for transport to Newtok

These actions are consistent with the Pioneering Phase of the Village Council’s *Strategic Management Plan*. How could the Project be refined?

Other possible Alternatives:

Some other possible alternatives to moving homes from Newtok to Mertarvik that could also address the project purpose include:

- Buyout of homes at risk in Newtok – this would include buying the homes from owners, demolishing them, and removing debris for disposal in Bethel.
- Installing flood and erosion protection at Newtok – this would include building a structure adequate enough to protect from storm flooding and erosion from the Ninglick River.

Are there other alternatives that should be considered?

What key issues may be associated with this Project?

The EA will discuss impacts that could occur from the Project; including to natural and cultural resources (such as water, vegetation, wildlife) and community resources/services (such as public health and safety, schooling, transportation). What are the particularly important impacts or issues that need to be considered in the EA?

What is the next step in the process?

All of the comments received during this scoping period will be considered and help refine and focus preparing the EA. A draft of the EA and its findings will be made available for a 30 day comment period, anticipated early summer 2016.

How can comments be provided?

Written comments about the purpose and need, the Project and Alternatives, and particular environmental issues you feel are important to address can be provided by:

- Email to FEMA: Mertarvik-EA@fema.dhs.gov
- By fax to FEMA: (425) 487-4613
- By mail (comment sheet can be used) to FEMA: Science Kilner, FEMA Region 10, 130 228th Street SW, Bothell, WA 98021
- By submitting a comment sheet at the public meeting in Newtok on April 5 at 6pm in the school or the agency public meeting on April 11 at 1pm in Anchorage.

Written comments must be submitted by April 25, 2016.

Where is additional information available?

When available, information and updates about the Project will be posted to:

<https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/dcra/PlanningLandManagement/NewtokPlanningGroup.aspx>

Questions about the Project may be directed to: Romy Cadiente, Village of Newtok at (907) 237-6095 or email at bunjing2@gmail.com.