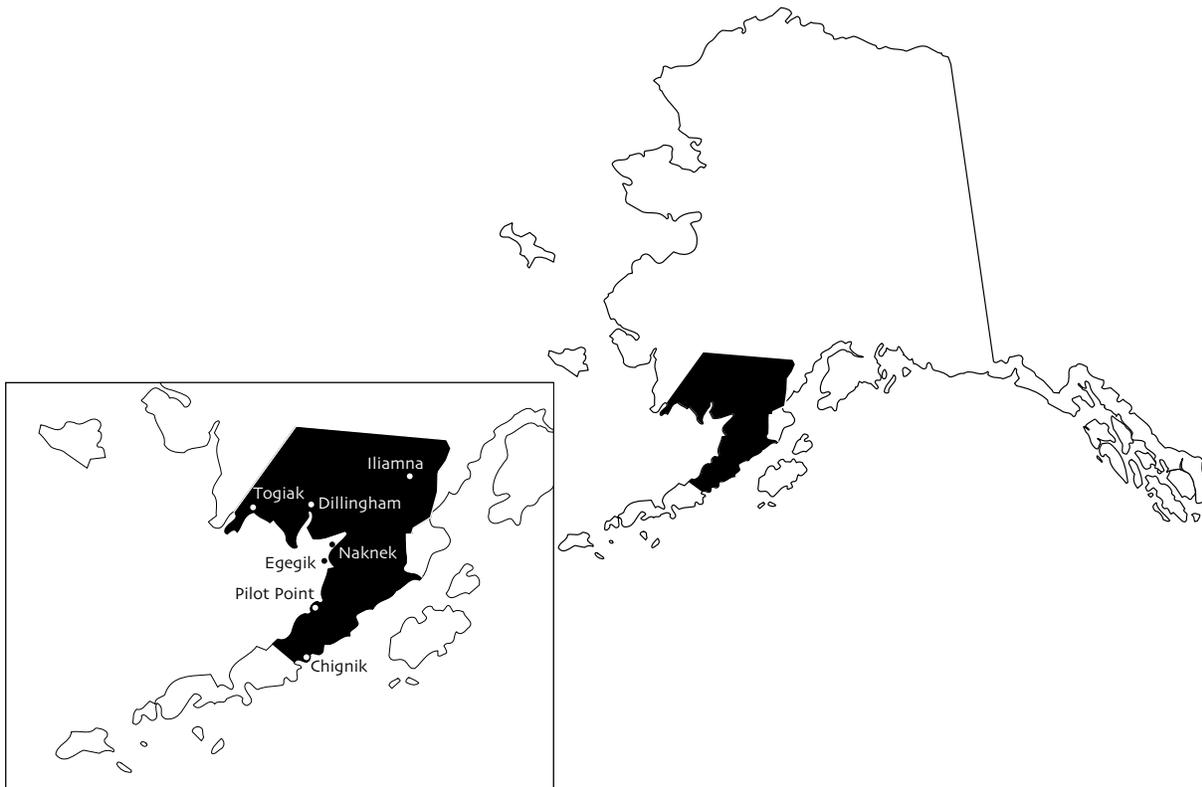


# Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment

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## Bristol Bay and Alaska Peninsula

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A joint project of  
**Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference**  
and the  
Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development  
Divisions of Trade & Development and Tourism

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# Introduction

In 1995, the Alaska Regional Development Organizations (ARDORs), a network of state-designated and regionally-empowered economic development corporations, identified tourism industry development as a common objective. Further, they concluded that a lack of basic public infrastructure was one of the greatest barriers to orderly industry development and impeded the optimum movement and accommodation of travelers within the state. This lack is particularly pronounced in rural Alaska, where tourism represents one of the few economic development opportunities available to many communities. Subsequently, the ARDORs determined that a top priority was to conduct a rural tourism infrastructure needs assessment. Although other projects could be considered, the focus of the assessment would be on “public infrastructure,” or that for which state and/or local government would have the primary responsibility.

Performance of the infrastructure needs assessment was included in a successful funding proposal submitted to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) by the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development, Division of Trade and Development (DTD).

Concurrently, Governor Knowles’ *Marketing Alaska* Initiative recommended that the Alaska Division of Tourism (DOT) prepare a comprehensive strategic plan for tourism development using a public process that involves all affected parties, looks at the desired future condition of tourism in the state, identifies infrastructure needs and opportunities for public/private partnerships, creates an effective permitting process, considers sustainability, and creates year-round jobs for Alaskans. The information collected through this regionally-based assessment is essential to the beginning of any statewide tourism planning process and is also relevant to other state planning efforts including the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Airport Improvement Program and Governor Knowles’ Trails and Recreational Access in Alaska (TRAAK) initiative.

*Marketing Alaska* also directed the Division of Tourism to work with the Department of Community and Regional Affairs to implement rural tourism development strategies using the recently established Rural Tourism Center as a one-stop resource for rural Alaskans interested in tourism development. The objectives of the Center, a joint venture of the division, Alaska Village Initiatives, and USDA Rural Development are to coordinate statewide rural tourism efforts, provide rural tourism assistance, and collect and share general tourism information.

The joining of these initiatives, and the financial support of the EDA, resulted in a partnership between the ARDORs, the Division of Trade and Development and the Division of Tourism to carry out a process to identify the public infrastructure needs of rural Alaska as identified by the people and organizations who are stakeholders in the regions.

## Project Implementation

Successful implementation of the tourism infrastructure needs assessment project required participation from a broad spectrum of stakeholders including representatives of tourism businesses and organizations, communities and municipal agencies, public land managers and private land owners, and others who participate in or are impacted by tourism industry development in each region. The Department of Natural Resources, Division of Land, and the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Division of Statewide Planning, with their planning and graphics expertise and understanding of capital

improvement project processes, were involved in early discussions about the structure, content and outcomes of this effort.

The assessment was carried out through a series of regional roundtable meetings occurring from May through September 1996. A standardized format for each meeting was agreed, with flexibility for the unique requirements of individual regions. Roundtable meetings were open to the public, however, invitations were specifically sent to agencies and organizations involved in the management of tourism-impacted lands and facilities and to those having a direct interest in tourism industry development in the region. Although the summertime scheduling of these meetings made it difficult for some potential participants to attend, it was determined that this problem would exist to a greater or lesser extent no matter when they were held.

The roundtable meetings were structured to specifically accomplish three objectives. First, to identify the public infrastructure already in place. In support of this objective, Geographic Information System-generated maps of each region were produced showing existing tourism infrastructure and resources to the extent this information was available in existing GIS databases. These maps illustrated what was in place, where development opportunities might exist, and the spacial relationships between infrastructure and geographic features. At the conclusion of each meeting, these valuable reference tools were presented to the local host organization.

The second objective was to become aware of new infrastructure and attractions under development in each region. Federal, state and local organizations made brief presentations regarding their planning processes and new projects under development or in various planning stages. Private sector project developers were also encouraged to share information about their new or planned projects.

Then, recognizing what is in place and what is being planned, participants identified additional infrastructure projects that would either build on what exists, meet current industry needs, or create new industry development opportunities. A panel discussion followed to explain the criteria various funding sources use in assessing project feasibility. It was recommended that "fundability" should be considered in prioritizing projects.

Although it was suggested each region prioritize proposed projects to indicate their relative importance or the preferred sequence for implementation, some regions elected not to take this approach.

Each meeting closed with a discussion of how to move the proposed projects ahead through individual initiatives, through legislative action, and by forming partnerships among stakeholders to advocate for priority projects.

It should be noted that the projects and priorities identified in these meetings reflect the thinking of those in attendance. Although every effort was made to have broad representation of the public and private sector interests, the projects identified and the priorities given them do not necessarily represent a majority opinion of the residents of the specified region. Additionally, some areas of rural Alaska are not included in this assessment. Those are the regions in which there were no designated Alaska Regional Development Organizations at the time the meetings were conducted. These areas include the Bering Straits region, the majority of the Doyon region, and the area of the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

# BRISTOL BAY AND ALASKA PENINSULA

Sources: *Bristol Bay Tourism Development: Regional Strategies and Investment Opportunities*, Bristol Bay Native Corporation, Fall, 1995; *Profiles of Tribal Communities in the Bristol Bay Region*, Bristol Bay Native Association, April, 1995; *Hot Prospects: A Tourism Inventory & Assessment of Southwest Alaska*, SWAMC, October, 1991; *Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference, 1996 Overall Economic Development Program Report*, SWAMC, June, 1996; *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, DOT, Summer 1993; *Rural Alaska Tourism Assessment*, Community Enterprise Development Corporation, June, 1991; and, *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Dillingham, Alaska, September, 1996.

## A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region is located in southwest Alaska. It extends about 350 miles north to south and 230 miles east to west, covering approximately 40,000 square miles, an area comparable in size to the state of Ohio. The region includes three major mountain ranges: the Kilbuck Mountains to the northwest, the Taylor Mountains to the north, and the Aleutian Range which divides the Alaska Peninsula lengthwise. Eight major river systems largely define the location of settlements. The region has the world's largest runs of sockeye salmon and one of the state's largest herring fisheries. Commercial fishing and subsistence activities are major contributors to an economy largely tied to the provision of government services.

Dillingham, with about 2,300 residents, is the region's largest population center. The remaining population of about 5,700 is disbursed among 28 communities located primarily along the region's coastline and its rivers.

### ACCESS

King Salmon and Dillingham are the primary transportation and service hubs for Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region communities, with daily, year-round jet service from Anchorage. Most other communities in the region are served by daily, scheduled air taxi service. Charter air service is available to all villages on a daily basis. Except for roads between Dillingham and Aleknagik, King Salmon and Naknek, and Iliamna and Newhalen, there are no interconnecting regional roads.

Passenger ferry service is provided by the Alaska Marine Highway System from Kodiak to Chignik, Sand Point and Cold Bay on a limited spring, summer, fall schedule. Marine barge and container services connect many communities to Anchorage and Seattle.

### PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

The Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region is a diverse area featuring extensive lake and river systems, moist tundra and volcanic landscapes and a wide variety of fish, birds, marine and land mammals. Many of these natural attractions are located in national and state parks and refuges within the region's boundaries. In addition, the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region has a rich cultural heritage with Native, Russian and European influences. It is a cultural crossroads of three Native cultures; Yup'ik, Aleut and Dena'ina Athabaskan, each with its distinctive arts, language and lifestyle.

A sampling of the region’s tourism attributes and assets includes:

**NATIONAL AND STATE PARKS, REFUGES AND SANCTUARIES**

- Katmai National Park & Preserve
- Lake Clark National Park & Preserve
- Aniakchak National Preserve
- Wood Tikchik State Park
- Walrus Islands Game Sanctuary
- Togiak National Wildlife Refuge
- Becharof National Wildlife Refuge
- Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge
- Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge

**FISH**

- Five salmon species
- Rainbow trout and Dolly Varden
- Grayling
- Lake trout
- Whitefish and pike
- Shrimp and clams

**WILDLIFE**

- Caribou and moose
- Brown and black bear
- Wolves
- Walrus, seal lions, and whales
- Ducks, geese, cranes and swans

**HERITAGE SITES**

- Samuel K. Fox Museum
- Russian Orthodox churches
- King Salmon Visitor Center
- Katmai National Park & Preserve Interpretive Center
- Bristol Bay Historical Society Museum
- Accessible archeological dig sites

**CURRENT VISITATION TO REGION**

Tourists currently come to the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region primarily for world class sportfishing and hunting, bear viewing in Katmai’s Valley of 10,000 Smokes, and to enjoy adventure-based activities such as taking float trips on the many rivers and streams. Tourism industry growth in the region is directly related to the substantial amounts of acreage set aside for recreational purposes. While visitor numbers are seeing consistent growth, the extent to which that can be sustained or expanded may depend on the development of additional infrastructure and services to support increased visitation.

**POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Many communities within the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region would like to be more actively involved in the visitor industry. While there are some development opportunities within the existing, activity-oriented visitor base, little effort has been made to develop additional attractions or infrastructure to support industry growth and diversification within the region. A primary concern is developing attractions and activities that will generate revenue which will remain in local economies. Therefore, the communities and other development interests will need to focus on attraction and infrastructure enhancement before they can realize significant increases in the numbers, travel patterns, and kinds of visitors arriving in the region.

## CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

A number of challenges face the development of tourism in the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region. They include an underdeveloped attraction and services base, with the exception of the wilderness lodge sector. In general, there is not a diverse enough offering of activities and attractions available to attract and retain visitors, and not enough services have been designed to meet the visitors' needs. A related challenge is a lack of a local workforce trained in the hospitality industry skills.

The region has also suffered from a lack of marketing expertise and currently lacks sufficient funds to support an aggressive marketing effort. Geographic location and distance from major travel corridors and business hubs is also an obstacle because of the additional cost and time required for travel to and within the region.

The Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region faces some serious challenges in appealing to more mainstream visitors who are not attracted to the region's traditional sportfishing, hunting and adventure-oriented offerings. The region lacks an identity, as well as an attraction base, that would motivate visitors to come for other than the established reasons. The region is also challenged to persuade its existing visitor market to stay in the region longer and participate in additional activities. This is primarily due to the itinerary constraints of such visitors and the underdeveloped base of attractions and activities available.

## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

The primary tourism promotion organization for the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region has been Alaska's Southwest, the tourism marketing arm of the Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference. Recently, however, the Bristol Bay Visitors Council was formed to promote the region to visitors, to assist with tourism product and infrastructure development and to provide visitor industry education to regional residents and businesses.

## B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Participants from the Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region identified a variety of tourism industry development projects which they believed should be pursued. They chose not to prioritize the projects but, rather, to group them by category.

### ACCESS AND TRANSPORTATION

- Establish a shuttle service between the Dillingham airport and specific sites in and around Dillingham
- Promote affordable transportation to and within the region (consider stopover fares, "Alaska Pass" system as possible models)
- Expand Alaska Marine Highway System services into Bristol Bay

## ATTRACTIONS

- Establish a Visitor Contact Center at the Dillingham airport
- Provide a permanent location at the King Salmon airport for a visitors center
- Develop a commercial fishing industry museum in Dillingham
- Restore or replace the building housing the Naknek Museum, which features the history of the Bristol Bay fishing industry
- Develop a “traditional dance house” display for the Sam Fox Museum in Dillingham
- Renovate the Dillingham Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center building
- Identify funding mechanisms for community building renovation and construction (support a regional network of visitor information, cultural and interpretive centers)

## MARKETING

- Produce an interagency, interactive video on public lands including information on access, services and appropriate uses
- Establish a standardized format for the region’s printed information materials
- Develop a Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula visitors guide
- Explore additional Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula marketing opportunities
- Gain better understanding of and use current visitor demographics in regional tourism planning process
- Identify ways smaller villages can participate in industry

## INVENTORY

- Inventory cultural resources and culture-based businesses in the region for (a) planned book on cultural tourism in Alaska; and (b) information for a Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula region tourism brochure

## EDUCATION

- Develop educational seminars for small business operators
- Emphasize industry appropriate work force development and training

**ADDITIONAL PROPOSED PROJECTS**

- Develop hiking trails, campsites and public use cabins
- Develop the unique volcanic viewing opportunities of Maars, CO<sub>2</sub> gas springs in Becharof Lake region
- Establish pilot trails in Bristol Bay region linking villages and consider locating public use cabins along the routes
- Support establishment of a Cooperative Tourism Marketing entity for the region
- Assist Bristol Bay Visitors Council upgrade existing marketing tools
- Work with established and new tour companies to create “user-friendly” high-quality tour products in the region
- Create Brooks Camp/Naknek Lake bear watching package out of Bristol Bay
- Survey current visitors to determine ways to increase visitor stays, quality of experience, and expenditures in the region and make results available to business operators establishing and growing their businesses
- Develop ANCSA 17 (b) easements for access to federal lands from area villages
- Complete the Iliamna-Newhalen road to the community of Nondalton
- Construct a protected harbor and dock at Chignik and a road linking the communities of Chignik, Chignik Lagoon and Chignik Lake
- Construct an Iliamna Scenic Highway connecting lower Cook Inlet at Williamsport with interior southwest Alaska at Iliamna Lake

