

# A View from Alaska

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## Reflections on an Alaska I Didn't Know

Alaska, our largest state, is coping with the same troublesome issues as the other 49 states – dramatically escalating diabetes, the assets and liabilities of technology, diminishing budgets. In other ways, it is a state unto itself, rich with a unique culture and saddled with unique issues. That's my takeaway from the 16th Annual Alaska Tribal Conference this past October.



As a speaker and participant, I also came away with a fierce pride that Midwest, the company I serve as chemist and environmental specialist, is so dedicated to helping Alaska preserve its environment and the health of its wonderful people. There was much to take in before my presentation.

Opening ceremony: The atmosphere was pure family. Laughing, hugging, kissing, everyone from newborns to very, very senior citizens – a veritable family reunion. Keynoter Lincoln Bean Sr., a board member of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), spoke of his Alaska youth, subsisting off the land and sea. No roads. No grocery stores. There is much to value in the modernization that even rural Alaska cannot escape, but a new way of life can also wreak havoc on the very air, water and land on which Alaskans subsisted for centuries.

## Midwest's Alaska Connection

Dust is the cause of serious respiratory illness, the enemy of plant and aquatic life. It ruins vegetation and fish drying on roadsides. It is an albatross with which an evolving and environmentally concerned Alaska is wrestling. In my breakout session, Air Quality and Dust Palliative Safety, we talked of these problems. The concerns and worries brought up by participants shed light on the current concerns of Native Alaskans with regard to the use of chemical dust suppressants:

- One village resident asked if I would use any of our products around my home. In Native Alaska, unpaved roads are right outside their front doors. Kids and pets play in the chemically-treated dirt, which gets carried into their homes. "Yes," I told her. I used Soil-Sement on my unpaved driveway when my children were toddlers, and I had two dogs running in and out of my house.
- Another village had purchased salt for dust control, stored the bags in the same building as the village archives. The bags broke and spilled, crusting archival records in wet salt. The villagers wanted to save their papers, but were afraid the salt could cause them harm. What should they do? Most likely, salt purchased to control dust would not be harmful but could be very drying to the skin, so gloves would be a good idea. So, too, would be calling the supplier's customer service number. Another example of "new technology" being sold to users without educating them – surely the responsibility of the seller.
- And, the Tanana story. A woman said that after Midwest's EK35 had been applied to Tanana's runway and some road surfaces, heavy rains washed the product out of some of the roadways, but that other areas looked good and the runway was great. What went wrong, she asked? Here's the answer. In the spring of 2009 early and massive ice break-up on the Tanana River caused devastating flooding in Tanana and nearby communities. Many roads were washed

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The conference breakout sessions bear witness to today's problems. Having grown up with "city" water and private well water, I have never worried about drinking water harming me or my children. A woman at the conference came from a village that didn't have a public water system. Village elders contracted with a private company to drill wells for the residents. The money was paid, the wells drilled, and now residents have smelly, orange drinking water that is not even usable for laundry. The village has no regulatory basis for intervention.

Mike Brubaker, Co-director of the Center for Climate and Health, addressed the impact of climate change. Some Native Alaskans hunt, fish and gather in "warmer" months and store their food in the permafrost "freezer" for the winter. Now, early melting causes spoilage and food-related illness. Further, migration patterns of caribou and other Arctic wildlife are no longer stable because of changing melting patterns of the ice cap and permafrost.

Shopping for souvenirs, I spoke with an Inupiaq woman who owned a gallery in Anchorage where she has lived for five years. She was raised hunting, fishing and gathering seeds and berries when they were available. Young Inupiaq girls only speak the native language until they are three, and all learn the art of making parkas. Now her old village has TVs. The kids have cell phones. Her daughter, a college student with strong ideas about the "way life should be," plans to return to her native village and show all the elders about computers, fast food and modern living. The new ways versus the old: Preserving one while capitalizing on the other is not an easy task.

out or covered in silt. Federal emergency funds were secured to restore roads and repair and rebuild houses. Tanana used EK35 on the airport runway and access road and a different dust suppressant on the village roads in 2007. The city was pleased with the runway and access road results but not with the results on the village roads. For this reason EK35 was selected to restore the roads. Because of the delivery time requirements, EK35 was applied to about one third of the roadways. The alternate dust suppressant was applied in the other areas. The product washout described by the villager was the alternative product.



Whether it is food or electronics or dust suppressants, lack of training and education can result in much harm. Native Alaskans are looking for a way to balance history, nature, and culture with the "new ways of living." They have the right to know that the solutions they are offered are site specific and that any environmental claims their suppliers make are independently certified. There is little Midwest can do to change soda pop consumption or video game use, but we can and we will continue to be a leader not only in safe dust suppression product development but also a leader in the education process.

*Be wary if products are not independently certified environmentally safe.*