

ABSTRACT

**KEEPING IT CLEAN – AN ALTERNATIVE
APPROACH TO TMDL IN RURAL ALASKA**

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The Nushagak Mulchatna Watershed Project is one of the largest watershed planning efforts underway in rural Alaska. At this time, the Nushagak Mulchatna watershed is relatively pristine and provides a natural habitat for strong returns of four species of wild Pacific salmon and other wildlife resources important for subsistence and recreation in addition to the commercial salmon fishery. Due to plummeting market prices for salmon, local communities and private landowners (ANCSA Village Corporations and Native Allottees) are exploring economic diversity while regional communities are showing a growing interest in mining and power generation. These forces have precipitated an interest in watershed planning and estuarine protection to ensure the health of the untouched salmon and other wildlife habitat so critical to the socio-cultural and economic needs of the region's residents.

Total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) are a relatively new phenomenon in Alaska and those ready for implementation are largely limited to a handful of commercial activities (e.g., logging operations) or urban settings. Rural Alaskan communities recognize that unplanned growth and conflicting commercial and institutional missions are impacting surface and groundwater resources both at local and regional levels. The Nushagak Mulchatna Watershed Council (NMWC) is a progressive effort to develop a collective approach to this regional problem before intrusive intervention (TMDL development and implementation) and extensive restoration become necessary.

Formed in 1998 as a local initiative, the NMWC is comprised mainly of tribal and city governments and landowners to provide local leadership with technical support from tribal environmental staff in the villages and various agencies and organizations. Because of the vast size of the watershed (over 8 million acres), the Council divided the watershed into distinct but inter-related subwatersheds and developed criteria to compare and rank them. This process has fostered a strong regional commitment and also resulted in a strong sense of ownership and capacity at the local level to protect the health of the watershed.

An important goal of the watershed council is to educate area residents on watershed management and protection issues and has been an effective non-regulatory mechanism to address non-point source pollution sources in the communities. Council members and tribal environmental staff have developed specific action plans that can be collectively pursued in order to maximize community resources. The Council oversees an extensive water quality monitoring program along the lower Nushagak River that utilizes local monitors to collect baseline data. Because of increased mineral exploration, the Council is partnering with The Nature Conservancy to file an in-stream flow reservation. The Council is also partnering with the University of Alaska/Bristol Bay Campus on establishing watershed student planning interns that will assist with developing an integrated watershed management plan.

Lessons learned in the Watershed Council process, information collected and broad commitment from local and regional communities suggest strong support should TMDL development and implementation become necessary.