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Press Release

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DEC Helps Bring Running Water and Safe Wastewater Discharge to Homes in Remote Village

(ANCHORAGE, AK) – After more than 10 years of planning, design and construction, Chuathbaluk now has drinking water and flushing toilets for all 135 people of the village. The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation's Village Safe Water program helped the Chuathbaluk city council secure the necessary federal and State funding and provided project oversight of the sewer and water construction projects. The new system was constructed almost entirely by local workers.

Chuathbaluk is a remote village on the Kuskokwim River. Until now, residents hauled water to their homes from several watering points located around the village. The water had high concentrations of iron and manganese which made it look, smell, and taste poorly. Residents carried honeybuckets (five gallon buckets) to a lagoon to dispose of human waste. The honeybucket lagoon was also a significant health threat.

Now every house has indoor plumbing that provides safe, treated drinking water. The village also has a modern, underground sewer system that connects to every residence and common use buildings like the school. In total, more than 50 buildings are connected.

"The community is really excited about getting these projects completed," said Jim Smith, Mayor of Chuathbaluk. "Most people take getting water from a faucet and flushing a toilet for granted—but out here it makes a huge difference in our quality of life."

Although the costs are high to design and construct systems that must work at 50 degrees below zero, the human health benefits are high too. Having in-home access to running water and sewer reduces rates of invasive pneumococcal infections in children under 5 years old by 50%. Likewise, the rate of hospitalizations due to lower respiratory tract infections in children under 5 years old is more than double in villages where homes are not connected to water and sewer systems.

“The construction season is short and it’s challenging to get all the heavy equipment and building materials to the site,” said David Longtin, Village Safe Water project manager for Chuathbaluk. “Using local workers is a win-win—it helps keep labor costs down, limits travel costs, and provides jobs for local residents.”

The VSW program and its partners have increased the percentage of rural Alaska homes with indoor plumbing from an estimated 60 percent in 1998 to an estimated 80 percent today. However, there is still much work to be done. Approximately 1 in 5 rural homes still lack a flush toilet and a faucet.

Photos of the construction process are available by contacting Tim Hoffman at: timothy.hoffman@alaska.gov, or 907-269-0598.

For more information on DEC’s Village Safe Water Program, visit: <http://dec.alaska.gov/water/vsw/index.htm>.

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