



FEMA

# Best practices

Disaster Mitigation Working in Alaska

## Property buyouts prevent further flood losses in Salcha



“This project was a success in several respects. With the removal of buildings and other property, the Tanana River will be allowed to meander freely through the area, so that ultimately the natural wetlands and the fish and wildlife habitat will be restored. Most importantly, the families, their homes, and their property were moved out of harm’s way.”

-Karrie Shaw



Slush ice forming on Tanana River near Salcha, AK, October 13, 2008 (12 miles downstream of Sewell project area)

**Salcha, Alaska** - The Fairbanks North Star Borough’s (FNSB) offer to purchase several properties and remove existing buildings along Sewell Drive in Salcha, Alaska in 2005 turned out to be a wise one. Although most of the homes in the area along the Tanana River southeast of Fairbanks had been inundated and damaged by several previous floods, their removal after the Borough’s acquisition of the properties has prevented still further losses in subsequent floods, in Spring 2008, again in late Summer 2008, and

most recently in late April and early May 2009.

“The Sewell Drive acquisition is a real success story,” said Karrie Shaw, Land Management Specialist with the FSNB. “Any buildings left on that property would surely have been affected by this year’s floods,” she added.

Floods are common events at Salcha, and official records as well as the memories of local residents suggest that flooding

has increased dramatically in severity and frequency in recent years. And although floods can result from the runoff off late summer and early autumn rainfall – long-time residents remember well the “Great 1967 Fairbanks Flood” – the much more frequent, almost yearly ice-jam floods during fall freeze-up and spring break-up add the hazards of moving ice to the debris-laden, fast-rising waters.

An unusually wet summer of 2008 in Interior Alaska culminated in at least two new single-day rainfall records at Fairbanks in late July and heavy rainfall to the east and southeast of the city. Runoff of the late July rains resulted in a rise in the level of the Tanana River at Fairbanks to its highest levels since 1967, and on July 30th, the Salcha River near Salcha crested at 3 feet above flood stage where it crosses the Richardson Highway about 40 miles southeast of Fairbanks. More than 100 homes in the Salcha areas were affected by the floodwaters, and most of the Sewell subdivision was inundated.

The homes and other buildings and properties along Sewell Drive, as well as



One of the houses being towed to new location.

the roadway and private gravel airstrip, had been inundated to depths as great as 7 feet by floodwaters of the Tanana River several times since development of the subdivision began in the early 1980s. During the particularly damaging flood in November 2004, rapidly rising waters forced residents from their homes and left roads, driveways, homes, woodpiles, vehicles, and other personal property encased in a thick layer of ice, and some residents were unable to return to their homes for as long as 10 days. That experience prompted property owners to contact the Fairbanks North Star Borough to seek

permanent relief from what was becoming an almost annual event, and Borough officials worked with the residents over the next several months to address the issue.

In early 2005, the Borough filed an application with the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (AK DHS&EM) to obtain funding through the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) to acquire the affected properties and relocate the residents.

Participation in the program was voluntary, and 10 of the 15 properties in the subdivision were purchased – 4 homes were occupied, 3 were unoccupied, and 3 of the purchased properties were vacant. As a condition of the acquisition, all personal property had to be removed at the owner’s expense. Following the acquisition and removal of existing structures, no permanent structures can be erected on a property, and it must remain vacant land in perpetuity.

Four of the structures were sold and have been moved out of the flood zone, and two either have been or will be refurbished or restored to living condition. Usable building materials were salvaged and donated to local non-profit organizations and groups and were then either sold or auctioned.

“This project was a success in several respects,” said Shaw. “Most importantly, the families, their homes, and their property were moved out of harm’s way. Our emergency personnel will no longer have to endanger their own lives to rescue residents of the Sewell subdivision who used to get stranded by the fast-rising waters. And with the removal of buildings and other property, the Tanana River will be allowed to meander freely through the area, so that ultimately the natural wetlands and the fish and wildlife habitat will be restored.”



Lot 2, Block B, Sewell S/D – Former site of Maria Sewell mobile home