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Taking the dust out of dirt roads

By **Victoria Barber**
Aug 4th, 2010

Published in *the Arctic Sounder*



It's summer in the village, and in the village that means dust - dust road sides, coating people's clothes, getting on salmon drying racks and berries, dust everywhere.

"Last month I had to cover my breathing, with my shirt collar or jacket, just to walk around outside," said Glenna Parish, mayor of Buckland. "Probably everyone does."

Dust has always been around, but with more vehicles like four-wheelers and trucks kicking it up on village roads, it can be a health hazard for rural Alaska.

Buckland is one of eight rural communities exploring ways to combat dust in rural Alaska.

It started in 2001, when the Department of Environmental Conservation tested the air quality in Buckland, Ambler, Bethel, Kiana, Kotzebue, Noatak, Noorvik and St. Marys. It found that all had dust levels above the national standard for particulate pollution.

Long-term exposure to that much dust puts residents at risk of respiratory infection, asthma attacks, acute bronchitis and other ailments, experts say. Elders, children and people with heart or lung ailments are especially vulnerable.

The immediate impact of dust is familiar to anyone who has spent summer in an Alaska village, where roads are typically gravel-covered or dirt. Dust plumes up behind trucks and cars and planes, coating everything in its wake.

"It irritates your eyes and people get things, kind of sores, on the sides of their eyes," Parish said.

Some Buckland residents seem to have an allergic reaction to dust in town - a reddish variety carried in with the gravel from a nearby pit. It was severe enough that some people had to go to the clinic, Parish said.

"It's not good for our breathing, for our people," Parish said.

In 2008, the Alaska state Legislature approved \$650,000 in state money to address the dust problem in the communities.

Clark Milne, a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities maintenance engineer, headed up a meeting with village representatives in Nome last August to make a plan for how to use that money. The result is that this summer the communities will get a chance to test-drive new methods of dust control.



Driver Alvin Williams and unidentified assistant run a sprayer trailer down a dirt road in Ambler. Through a state-funded project, eight villages are testing new ways to keep the dust down in summer months. (Courtesy Photo, Clark Milne)



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The nitty gritty on dust control

The state bought "trailer sprayers" for the project - a 300-gallon tank on a trailer attached to several downward-pointing sprinklers, which can mist the road with a variety of solutions. The trailer hitches to the back of a four-wheeler or other vehicle.

There are a variety of dust suppressants that can go in the tank and work in different ways.

The simplest, most natural dust suppressant is water. Communities such as Kotzebue, Bethel and St. Mary's have already been using it on their roads. However, water dries quickly and the cost of having a city employee run circuits around town, repeatedly spraying water on the same roads every hot day, can outweigh its benefit, Milne said.

Then there are chemical sprays. Milne said he sent three or four different chemical solutions to each village.

Some weigh down dust particles so they don't hang in the air as long. Other make particles stick together, so they become heavier and don't float up as much. No one knows which solution will work the best with the geology and logistical reality of Alaska communities because such a trial is "completely alien to anything done before" Milne said. "We don't have a lot of experience with dust control in the villages."

One concern villages will have to weigh is how comfortable they feel spraying the chemicals into their environment. Milne said that he only bought products from companies that provided a battery of test results detailing their chemicals' toxicity and safety for people and the environment.

"We care about whether it bothers fish for sure, or berries or people. We didn't just buy some snake oil because someone said it was real cheap," Milne said.

However, Milne said he expects that as communities try the products and see their effects - positive or negative - they'll probably want more information before using one on a regular basis. Milne said the manufacturers' environmental testing still needs to be reviewed by a third party.

Mayor Parish in Buckland said she'll be weighing the risks of spraying chemicals with the known health impacts of having too much dust.

"We do need help in the controlling the dust but we want to make sure it's safe," Parish said.

It's too early to say what the preferred method will be - some villages are only now getting their sprayer trailers set up, and each town will have to spend enough time using each product to gauge its success. But after the delivery of the trailers and spray products, the state's grant has nearly come to an end. With the Nome meeting, the installation of the sprayer trailers, training residents to use them and providing chemical suppressants, the state has blown through nearly its entire grant for dust control, Milne said. About 60 to 70 percent of that was eaten up by freight alone.

But Milne is hopeful that villages around the state can take the information they get from the trials and build a case for effective dust control in their communities.

Dust control doesn't fall under the purview of the Department of Transportation, Milne said, but once rural residents know what products and methods work they'll have a stronger case to lobby for support.

"Dust is painful and annoying and it's constantly burying you . . . but I believe it's possible, if we just try enough products and test enough, to find something that really works," Milne said.

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