

Rural Backhaul program rids villages of hazardous wastes

by Lynn Zender and Steve Christensen

Given that most Alaska communities are scattered throughout this vast state and accessible only by air, boat or seasonal roads, waste management is a constant challenge, and certainly not something thought about every day. The disposal of hazardous waste, in particular, poses potential risks to our lands, waters, and subsistence resources, and to the health and well-being of Alaskans.

Our rural landfills are unlined, and dangerous chemicals from hazardous wastes could potentially leach into local soil and water or be emitted into the air from open burning. This is particularly hazardous for children and pregnant mothers. Over a four times greater risk of certain birth defects was found for babies born to mothers from communities with high hazardous waste content landfills.

Fortunately, Alaska has a sound and rapidly growing program to safely remove hazardous wastes, largely eliminating health and environmental risks. The Backhaul Alaska program leverages the skills and support of state and federal government entities, and the private sector, to work with our remote communities and provide the resources to safely backhaul harmful wastes.

Backhaul Alaska coordinates the responsible collection, transportation and recycling of hazardous materials, including spent lead-acid batteries, electronic scrap (e-scrap) such as discarded TVs and computers, and mercury-containing light bulbs, from remote communities.

The program would not be possible without a broad range of supporters and

sponsors and, as the foundation of its success, Alaskans everywhere who have stepped up for their communities. Local staff and community volunteers spend countless hours inventorying, packing, and loading spent materials onto barges, planes and trucks across Alaska.

What began as a brainstorming idea from Sen. Lisa Murkowski more than a decade ago became a formal, modest pilot program in 2018, operating in 10 rural Alaska Native communities. In 2024, Backhaul Alaska served 94 remote villages, with plans to continue growing every year.

Backhaul Alaska is now gearing up for its 2025 collection efforts. Zender Environmental, an Alaskan non-profit, is proud to work with the Solid Waste Alaska Taskforce, comprised of senior waste experts from Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and Kawerak to administer the program and provide the specialized training, supplies, logistical and technical support necessary for each community to move waste safely and efficiently.

Importantly, Backhaul Alaska also shows that the private sector is ready and willing to help.

For example, the program has collected more than 500,000 pounds of lead-acid car, truck, snow machine, ATV, boat, tractor and other heavy equipment batteries since 2018. These batteries are shipped south for recycling, supported in part by the Responsible Battery Coalition, which helps facilitate the packing, shipping and recycling of the majority of those batteries, and

continued on page 9

Tribal Leaders Demand Answers after Fuel Spill

2025 Drilling Season Begins with 1000 Gallon Diesel Spill at Staging Camp

Today (April 28th), 2025 at Beaver, Alaska) Tribal leaders across the Yukon Flats region called for an immediate cease work order and demanded answers from Doyon, Ltd. and Hilcorp Alaska, LLC related to a fuel spill occurring earlier in April 2025.

According to initial reports filed with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, at least 1000 gallons of diesel fuel leaked from equipment onto the snow and ice at a staging area near the Yukon River Bridge.

Tribal leaders called for immediate action and accountability:

“This is simply unacceptable,” commented Chief Rhonda Pitka, of the Beaver Village Council. “For years, the Tribes voiced their concerns, sought to engage with Doyon about this project, and always we were assured the project will have the highest standards for safety and lowest measurable impacts. They are not listening to the Tribes of the region. Against our opposition they are set to begin drilling this summer. Now we’ve seen our first spill. It is past time for our Regional Corporation to stop pushing this toxic and divisive project forward. Summer work should be halted until we know the full impact of this spill. I want to ask everyone who is concerned about the future of the Yukon River to contact the Doyon Board and let your voices be heard.”

Micheal Peter, Second Chief of Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich’in Tribal Government stated: “The drilling season hasn’t even started yet and already we have

an accident causing pollution to our lands and waters. The Yukon River is the lifeblood of our people. It belongs to all of us,

continued on page 12

Decades of inadequate health care for incarcerated Alaskans

Lawsuit documents dangerously deficient physical, mental, and dental health care across all Alaska prison and jail facilities.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Alaska, with the ACLU National Prison Project, filed a class action lawsuit today against the Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) challenging DOC’s inadequate, dangerous, and inhumane health care system. The federal court lawsuit, brought on behalf of incarcerated Alaskans, contends that the state’s failure to provide adequate health care is a violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments and has resulted in needless suffering, decline, and death.

A years-long investigation into the inadequate physical, dental, and mental health care for thousands of incarcerated Alaskans demonstrates a critical need to fix DOC’s health care system immediately.

“Thousands of Alaskans depend on DOC to take care of their most basic and essential health care needs. They have no other option once they are detained. But the care they’re receiving, if they receive it, often comes too late, and is woefully inadequate,” said Megan Edge, Prison Project Director for the ACLU of Alaska. “State officials have known for years about these unconstitutional, inhumane, and cruel conditions, but have failed to make meaningful changes. We are hopeful that the courts will mandate an overhaul of DOC’s medical processes. If they don’t, Alaskans will continue to suffer and die needlessly.”

According to DOC, the cost of care for someone housed in an Alaska state jail or prison is \$202 per day. However, this does not include medical care for chronic diseases, end-of-life, or emergency care. At the beginning of 2025, Alaska Governor Michael Dunleavy announced a proposed state budget that included \$481 million for the DOC. DOC’s budget has continued to grow, without safer conditions or improved health care.

“When it comes to health care, Alaska’s prisons showcase some of the worst conditions of confinement that we’ve seen anywhere in the country,” said Nancy Rosenbloom, Senior Litigation Advisor

at the ACLU’s National Prison Project. “The Alaskans who we represent in this lawsuit have been subject to an egregious lack of medical care that is heartbreaking, inhumane, and violates their constitutional rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.”

Examples of the health care inadequacies include the following:

Untreated diabetes led to a coma and time in the ICU. In July 2023, an incarcerated diabetic woman complained of severe low back pain and was diagnosed with muscle spasms. Her pain did not improve and became so excruciating that she could not walk to receive medical attention, eat meals, or use the bathroom without the assistance of other incarcerated people. Medical staff did not check her blood sugar levels even while she remained in her cell, incapacitated by pain. Approximately one week later, an officer noted that the woman had fallen out of bed and was unresponsive. Upon being transferred to the emergency room, she was found to be in a diabetic coma, a life-threatening complication of poorly controlled diabetes. She spent 6 days in the intensive care unit before returning to prison.

A diagnosed chronic illness progressed to pre-stages of colon cancer. An incarcerated man was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, a chronic inflammatory bowel disease in which abnormal reactions of the immune system cause inflammation and ulcers in the large intestine. Because of DOC’s failure to treat his disease appropriately during a previous incarceration, he suffered enormous pain and discomfort, and the colitis progressed to the advanced pre-stages of colon cancer.

Untreated cataracts led to near blindness and the inability to care for other health problems. An incarcerated man’s cataracts worsened and advanced to the point where surgery was required. Because DOC failed to provide him with the needed procedure, his vision has become so impaired that he cannot clearly see the food on his plate or safely navigate the prison environment. Years after his diagnosis of bilateral “dense” cataracts and myopia (nearsightedness, with a visual

continued on page 12



Available in 2025 on the Kuskokwim River

For:

- Full day charters
- ½ day charters
- Special project support
- Small general cargo
- Flag stops



Napaimute Marine Services – 907.545.2877 / napaimute@gci.net*




* A subsidiary of the Native Village of Napaimute, dba: Napaimute Enterprises, L.L.C.

The Delta Discovery

CLASSIFIEDS

For Sale

FOR SALE

300 Gallon Plastic Water Tanks in stock. Call Shorty at Shorty's Shop for pricing. 543-3158 or 545-3157 (19)(9/18-cnx)

For Sale: Plastic Water Tanks

Only 31" wide, 70" high, 74" long. 500 Gallons, easily connect two for 1000 gallons! Fits through most doors for easy installation. Contact Shorty for pricing and information (907) 545-3157. (35)(6/21-cnx)

4 Acres Fishcamp Land for Sale, \$10,000. 1-907-545-0103. (8)(5/19-cnx)

HOLITNA PARCELS RIVERFRONT AND SOUTH HILLSIDE 907-277-4608 (7)(11/1-cnx)

Knitted Yarn Socks for Mother's Day and Graduation. Men's women's children's and infant sizes. Handmade for warmth and comfort. Expert fast knitter with over 50 years experience. Mom learned to knit from Miss Etta Jones, their first BIA teacher in the 1930s. Call or text (907) 588-2005 for more info. (50)(1/22-cnx)

CASH SALE

Native Village of Kwinhagak, in behalf of the Native owner, is offering the following tract of land for sale by sealed bid:

Parcel C: lot 3, U.S. Survey No. 9761, Alaska, situated on an island in the Kanektok River approximately 8 miles northeasterly of the city of Quinhagak, Alaska. Containing 39.98 acres, as shown on the plat of survey officially filed on August 13, 1990.

For more information on property, bid procedures, and terms of sale:

Phone (907) 556-8165 or (907) 556-8171 extension 207 or write:

Native Village of Kwinhagak - Realty Department PO BOX 149

Quinhagak, AK 99655
Title to land sold as a result of this advertisement will be conveyed in fee simple status by approved deed.

Bid opening - All bids must be received at Native Village of Kwinhagak- Realty Department, P.O. BOX 149, Quinhagak, AK 99655 (139)(5/7-8/27)

For Rent

OUTSIDE STORAGE SPACE FOR RENT.

EQUIPMENT, BOATS OR VEHICLES. NEAR BOAT HARBOR. FENCED IN AREA. 543-2402. (16)(3/17-cnx)

Employment

Looking to Hire 2 Carpenters

Pay Rate D.O.E. Summer and Fall Season. Send your resume to yupik.boss89@gmail.com. More info to call listed phone number below. Joe Pete/ Apollo Home Solutions, LLC, 907-545-6762 (32)(7/21-cnx)

The Native Village of Goodnews Bay is seeking applicants interested in applying for TPO positions.

*Starting Pay: \$25.00/hr.

NVGB will provide airfare and a place to stay.

Interested? Contact Tribal Administrator at 907-967-8929. (33)(10/16-cnx)

Invitation to Bid

YUPIIT SCHOOL DISTRICT REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Food Services Supplies

The Yupiit School District hereby invites

qualified vendors to submit bids for acceptance by the District to purchase supplies and food district wide for the Food Service Program. Final bids may be submitted by no later than May 8, 2025 at 2pm AKST. Bid can be obtained by calling Jason Charles at 907-825-3600 during normal business hours, or from the District Website: <http://www.yupit.org/> Yupiit School District. Code requires that businesses or individuals contracting to do business with the Yupiit School District be in compliance with State Law. (96)(4/30-5/7)

Public Notice

VFW MEMBERSHIP Freedom isn't free, and millions of Americans have paid the price for the freedom we enjoy today. Since 1899, the Veterans of Foreign Wars has served those who served America. From writing veterans legislation and then leading the fight to get it through Congress, to community projects that benefit all Americans, the VFW is an opportunity for veterans to continue to serve. Contact the VFW Robert V. Lindsey Post #10041 at 543-2241 and ask what you can do for your community. (83)(3/26-cnx)

AK Alcohol Cancer Dangers from page 4

rate of colon cancer in the world in 2018. A way to reduce these common cancers is to decrease alcohol consumption.

"This is an important step for Alaskan consumers, who have the right to know basic information about all the food and beverage products they purchase—let alone a product that is an addicting carcinogen and happens to be a leading cause of harms, social problems, and health-care costs in Alaska," stated Tim Naimi, MD, Director of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria.

"This bill represents an important milestone," said Thomas Gremillion, Director of Food Policy at Consumer Federation of America. "Cancers caused by alcohol

kill tens of thousands of Americans each year. At the same time, survey after survey shows that fewer than half of adults are aware that alcohol increases cancer risk. One survey showed that 10% of adults think drinking wine decreases cancer risk. It does not. Drinking any type of alcohol—even small amounts—increases cancer risk. Provisions like Rep. Gray's will enable more informed drinking decisions, and ultimately save lives."

Representative Andrew Gray represents House District 20 (Anchorage's U-MED district) in the Alaska State House. Outside the legislature, he is a physician assistant at Alaska Urgent Care. Previously, he was a PA with the Alaska Army National Guard and the Alaska VA.

Backhaul Program from page 5

has returned more than \$50,000 back to the program as payment for the battery cores. Backhaul Alaska uses this money to defray program costs, extending the funding the program receives from other sources.

Other generous private sector partners include The Matson Foundation, which regularly donates critical free shipping containers and services to move waste out of the state, and e-scrap recyclers Total Reclaim and Metro Metals. Alaska Airlines is also now a Backhaul partner, providing free shipping of e-scrap from Nome to Anchorage when cargo planes return empty, and Bering Air provides similar services from Bering Strait.

Finally, grants from agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of

Transportation, Department of Agriculture Rural Development, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Denali Commission underscore the federal government's recognition of the importance of addressing Alaska's unique waste management challenges.

The work of Backhaul Alaska is not easy, but it is undeniably vital. By working together to retrieve hazardous waste from rural Alaska, the program safeguards the health and environment of all Alaskans while building a cleaner, more robust economy for the state.

Lynn Zender is the founder and executive director of Zender Environmental. Steve Christensen is the executive director of the Responsible Battery Coalition.

UAF Graduation from page 4

A. Toniolo, professor of civil engineering; Amy L. Vinlove, dean of the School of Education; and Mingchu Zhang, professor of natural resources and environmental studies.

This year's honorary degree recipients are Larry Bartlett, Hukk'aagheestaatno Lorraine David, Pauline Hobson and Cautekaq Eva Evelyn Yanez. Robert Byrd, Emily Edenshaw, Steve Holmberg and

Togi Letuligasenoa received Meritorious Service Awards.

Honorary degree and Meritorious Service Award recipients, emeriti, the student speaker and student award winners were celebrated at a ceremony on Friday, May 2, at 5:30 p.m. in the Davis Concert Hall on the Troth Yeddha' Campus in Fairbanks. UAF hosted a Ph.D. hooding ceremony on May 2 at 11 a.m. in the Davis

Concert Hall.

The event was streamed live on the UAF YouTube channel and the UAF Facebook page.

Class of 2025 profile

The following provides a snapshot of the UAF 2025 graduating class. These are preliminary numbers, current as of April 28, 2024. Final statistics will not be available until early September.

1,184 awards expected to be conferred on approximately 1,110 students:

- 55 occupational endorsements
- 186 certificates
- 237 associate degrees
- 471 bachelor's degrees
- 210 master's degrees
- 31 doctorates
- 48 recommendations for education licensure

Letters from page 6

message of Ballot Measure 1 is clear: Alaskans support earned sick leave. But our job as lawmakers is to ensure that laws passed at the ballot box work effectively on the ground.

That's why we introduced House Bill 161 (HB161) and its Senate counterpart. It does not seek to repeal Ballot Measure 1, nor does it override the will of the voters. Instead, HB161 refines the measure to ensure it works within the context of Alaska's unique economy, where small and seasonal businesses are vital to local communities and livelihoods.

Let us be clear: this bill does not eliminate earned sick leave. It does not lower wages. What it does is provide nar-

rowly tailored exemptions for businesses with fewer than 50 employees and for seasonal employers. These adjustments respect both the constitutional limits on altering voter initiatives and the realities faced by employers in every corner of our state.

Seventeen other states have implemented paid sick leave laws, with exemptions, phase-ins, and flexibility built in. Ballot Measure 1 lacks the provisions that would make the policy work for a state as large and diverse as ours. HB161 seeks to correct this by offering the breathing room small businesses need to comply responsibly, without undermining the core purpose of the law: keeping workers safe

and supported when they're ill.

Alaska's business climate is already one of the toughest in the nation. High transportation costs, limited labor pools, and steep operating expenses are daily challenges. Adding new mandates without considering scale and seasonality risks real consequences: reduced hours, job cuts, slower growth, or even business closures. These aren't scare tactics, they're real concerns voiced by employers from Ketchikan to Utqiagvik.

In Alaska, small businesses aren't faceless corporations. They're neighborhood diners, family-run landscaping services, and local retailers. They operate on tight margins, in isolated areas, during

short and intense seasons. Our Alaskan small businesses need room to respond to employee illness with nuance and grace, not government mandates. HB161 is a targeted, thoughtful adjustment. It honors the spirit of the ballot initiative while making it sustainable for the small and seasonal businesses that keep Alaska running.

This bill moves us in the right direction. Let's keep Alaska open and thriving for all of us.

Senator Jesse Bjorkman, District D on the Kenai Peninsula; Representative Justin Ruffridge, District 7 Kenai/Soldotna; Representative Julie Coulombe, District 11 Anchorage

**Discover it! In the Delta Discovery classifieds
Free Listing Online with each printed classified ad!**

25 cents a word • Deadline: Friday, 5 p.m.

Office: In the Subway Building - 401 Ridgecrest Drive

P. O. Box 1028, Bethel, AK 99559

Phone: (907) 543-4113 • Fax: (907) 543-4116