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Summary of Denali Commission Sustainable Utilities Workgroup History and Direction

Purpose: Engage relevant federal and state agencies, utility associations, non-profits and utility organizations involved in delivery of rural Alaska electricity, water and sewer, solid waste and bulk fuel utility services.

Collaborate in developing recommendations. Promote and implement those recommendations.

The **Sustainable Utilities Workgroup**, originally called the Sustainable Utilities Steering Committee, was formed in mid-1999 and is the oldest standing committee under the umbrella of the Denali Commission's interagency MOU. Its formation grew out of concerns by funding agencies (USDA-RD, the Denali Commission, AIDEA, the EPA, IHS, VSW, and others) over the long-term viability of rural energy, bulk fuel and sanitation facilities in terms of their management, operation, and maintenance capabilities.

The Workgroup's initial focus was on developing a scope of work needed for a comprehensive examination of the issues of operation, management and maintenance of rural utilities systems, including electric power, sanitation facilities and bulk fuel facilities. This project was undertaken by the University of Alaska, Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) and funded in large part by USDA-RD, with assistance from the Denali Commission and the Alaska Science and Technology Foundation. AIDEA was the contract administrator. The Sustainable Utilities Workgroup was closely involved in helping to guide the development of this report and monitor progress.

Although the ISER report was not completely finalized and published until July of 2003, many of the findings and recommendations became clear by 2001. In September of 2001, the Workgroup held a two-day facilitated retreat to develop policies and recommendations designed to implement the major findings of the ISER report. After this retreat, 42 recommendations were assigned to individual agencies or groups of agencies for implementation. Subsequent meetings of the Workgroup have focused on progress made or issues associated with the different recommendations.

In September of 2003, another two-day retreat was held to undertake a comprehensive review of the 42 recommendations and evaluate their progress and status. About half of the recommendations were determined to have been completed or no longer valid, while work remained to be done on the rest. Additionally, the Workgroup reviewed its priorities and developed 31 new or revised recommendations designed to improve the sustainability of rural utility systems. One of the recommendations was the "Denali Commission should pilot a competition to reward innovation in sustainable utility

projects.” This Sustainability Awards Program is currently being developed and implemented.

On November 3 & 4, 2005, a third facilitated **two-day retreat** was held. The Workgroup discussed rural utilities, including rate-setting and sustainability; energy costs; and mitigating the effects of climate change. It also reviewed its objectives and set priorities for 2006-2007.

OBJECTIVES FOR 2006-2007

1. Develop Alaska-specific affordability index study for rural Alaska water and sewer utilities.
2. Support Rural Utility Cooperative (RUC) and the Alaska Village Electric Cooperative (AVEC).
3. Continue support of the effort to develop Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA) regulations to improve the regulation of rural Alaska water and sewer utilities.
4. Implement accredited utility manager program using Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) training workshops.
5. The subcommittee funded and led by USDA Rural Development and the Environmental Protection Agency will continue developing strategies for communication among the service providers, division of labor, and community outreach.

The Sustainable Utilities Workgroup spearheaded the formation of several other Denali Commission workgroups. It also provides a forum for utilities-related agencies or entities to work together to help resolve issues of common concern. Entities that never used to work together now do so as a matter of course—an unprecedented outcome that benefits Alaska’s rural utility systems.

Co-Chairs:

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Federal

**Bill Allen, State Director
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