

## MMS ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM: ONGOING STUDIES

**Region:** Alaska

**Planning Areas:** Beaufort Sea and Lower Cook Inlet

**Title:** Researching Technical Dialogue with Alaskan Coastal Communities: Analysis of the Social, Cultural, Linguistic, and Institutional Parameters of Public/Agency Communication Patterns (AK-04-09)

**MMS Information Needs to be Addressed:** Since MMS primarily communicates to a diverse public through the preparation of regulatory measures, EISs, and other documents, an analytic investigation of alternative communication processes and their effects on key constituents is needed. This study will evaluate the effectiveness of various communication strategies, explore prospects for altering future communication efforts, and seek to make agency communication more effective in the Alaska region. By reducing miscommunication with stakeholders, this study will enhance the ability of the public to participate more fully in the NEPA process.

**Total Cost:** \$300,000

**Period of Performance:** FY 2004-2007

**Conducting Organization:** EDAW, Inc.

**MMS Contact:** [Chief, Alaska Environmental Studies Section](#)

*Background* Technical dialogue plays an important role in shaping OCS decisions, yet relatively little research has been devoted to investigate the communication processes between technical professionals and citizen stakeholders. Some research of this nature has been done, but not in Alaska, where distinctive resource management issues and distinctive social, cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences exist. Previous social research indicates that differing knowledge bases and paradigms routinely complicate the communication efforts of federal institutions in Alaskan coastal communities. Some agencies have already made significant progress in efforts to assess and improve the effectiveness of their written communication methods with the public.

The proposed research would specifically investigate the effects of MMS written communication efforts in selected coastal communities and try to improve communication processes with local stakeholder groups. It would systematically identify and analyze potential communication obstacles and then pursue remedies through pilot-testing a series of experimental “newsletters” on targeted focus groups. Is MMS successfully communicating the messages that it intends to communicate? Does a particular communication have any measurable effect on relevant local understandings? Are unintended messages being communicated? Can MMS improve communication techniques through cost efficient measures? Can issues of public trust be addressed through a more effective written communication process? If specific written communication problems can be identified through controlled testing, the study would then seek to provide both a rationale and a method to explore potential changes in future agency communication strategies with regard to:

- message content
- mechanisms of message delivery
- timeliness of communication
- availability and use of supporting materials and information

### Objectives

1. Assess the measurable effectiveness of MMS written communication methods with various communities of coastal Alaska.
2. Identify potential obstacles in MMS written communication efforts and develop a strategy for their amelioration.
3. Generate specific recommendations for improved written communication methods and for their implementation in agency processes.
4. Improve prospects for public/agency communication and collaboration in resource management issues of the Alaskan OCS.

### Methods

1. Analyze and catalogue the record of public comments from Cook Inlet and the Beaufort Sea to assess the scope and character of manifest communication issues and regional opinions about offshore oil development and MMS regulatory processes.
2. Conduct a literature search to assess alternative federal agency written communication efforts with local populations that are relevant to MMS goals and processes.
3. Identify appropriate samples of study participants in communities on the North Slope and the Kenai Peninsula.
4. Devise a cost effective procedure to create focus groups to assess public knowledge and attitudes about the OCS regulatory environment, the communication of scientific and technical information, and key agency messages.
5. Work with MMS management and staff to prepare new (theory-driven) textual materials to disseminate agency statements under controlled and variable circumstances, including the preparation and distribution of various “newsletters” to compare their effectiveness as measured across a range of key variables.
6. Monitor changes in understanding, perceptions of OCS management, and durability of opinions among study participants because of pilot-test materials.
7. Continue to test and monitor communication efforts in a limited and controlled newsletter format until a model based upon “lessons learned” can be implemented.
8. Coordinate communication processes with other relevant MMS studies.

**Current Status:** A final report is due April, 2008.

**Final Report Due:** April, 2008

**Publications Completed:** None

**Affiliated WWW Sites:** <http://edaw.com/mms/>  
<http://www.mms.gov/alaska/>

**Revised date:** March 2008