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Fuel Costs, Migration, and Community Viability

Recent rapid increases in fuel costs have focused attention on migration and the viability of remote rural Alaska communities. This report reviewed existing studies and data sources relating to the economic and social viability of remote rural Alaska communities.* We looked for possible linkages between high fuel costs and migration.

Our review indicates the following: (1) migration from smaller places toward larger places is an ongoing phenomenon that is more noticeable when birth rates drop; (2) there is no systematic empirical evidence that fuel prices, by themselves, have been a definitive cause of migration; (3) the pursuit of economic and educational opportunities appear to be a predominant cause of migration; (4) however, currently available survey data are not sufficient to definitively determine other reasons for migration, which could include concerns about public safety and/or alcohol abuse; 5) most of the survey data pre-date the latest rapid increase (2006-2008) in fuel prices. We suggest several ways that better data could be collected on community viability and the reasons for migration.

We conclude that fuel costs matter but they do not seem to be a definitive driver of migration. However, because migration appears to be related to earnings, the people who are hardest hit by high fuel costs may be least able to afford to move. The problem of high fuel costs is an urgent challenge that needs to be addressed, irrespective of the complex effects of fuel prices on migration.

*Some of these studies are difficult to find so we scanned them and put the PDF files on our Web site along with the final report.

Fuel Costs, Migration, and Community Viability Final Report

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