

Why Obama wants to spend millions relocating entire U.S. communities

By **Chris Mooney** February 9

This story has been updated.

When President Obama visited Alaska last summer, he did not stop in [tiny Kivalina](#), a village of about 400 that has become a poster child for climate vulnerability. But he did fly over it, leading to [the photograph above taken from Air Force One](#), which captures a startling image of just how exposed the community truly is.

Located on a narrow barrier island well above the Arctic Circle, and facing severe erosion as declining sea ice exposes its coast to large waves, Kivalina needs to relocate — which could cost well [over \\$ 100 million](#). And now, Obama's [budget request to Congress](#) includes a proposed \$ 400 million “to cover the unique circumstances confronting vulnerable Alaskan communities, including relocation expenses for Alaska Native villages threatened by rising seas, coastal erosion, and storm surges.”

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The funding would be [through the Department of the Interior](#), whose secretary, Sally Jewell, visited Kivalina last year. It's part of a larger \$ 2 billion coastal climate resilience program proposed in the agency's budget.

The Obama administration's request for funding to potentially relocate Alaskan villages is part of a much broader climate and energy focused agenda that includes a proposed \$ 10 per barrel tax on oil (to be used to fund major clean transportation projects) and a big boost in funding for “transformative” clean energy research.

It's not yet clear how this money would be apportioned or which communities might receive it — not all of it is for relocation, and Kivalina surely wouldn't be the only contender for the funds. [Several other Native Alaska villages](#) are also facing severe shoreline erosion and the need for relocation. Still, with a sum this large, it does appear that the funds, if approved by Congress (which is a big if), could potentially help support one of the earliest relocations of any U.S. community imperiled by climate change.

“When Kivalina voted to relocate decades ago, they found there was no government agency in charge of relocation, and that most funding was available only after disaster struck,” said Christine Shearer, a researcher

who wrote a book on Kivalina and now works for the NGO CoalSwarm. “And disaster has struck Kivalina many times, with erosion and flooding, threatening their safety and lives. While the \$400 million Resilience Fund is not enough to relocate all the Alaska Native communities facing displacement from climate change, it is an important start.”

“President Obama’s proposed funds to combat climate change in Alaska, particularly his Coastal Climate Resilience Fund, finally moves his climate legacy from rhetoric to reality for today’s communities at the front lines of rising oceans,” added Victoria Herrmann, director of the Arctic Institute at the Center for Circumpolar Security Studies, by email.

“While Alaska may be the first to see climate relocation, it won’t be the last,” she said. “In order to truly combat climate change and build resiliency in American communities, the President’s proposal must extend beyond our northernmost state to help towns across the country adapt to the effects of a changing climate.”

An [initial reaction](#) to the proposal from Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) was positive. Murkowski supports relocations of Alaskan communities if they choose that option, and said in the statement that “the President’s proposal to assist Alaskans impacted by climate change through a resiliency fund” was already present in a bill of hers, the [OPENS Act](#). However, Murkowski objected to how the program is proposed to be funded, which is through revenues achieved by reducing “oil and gas revenue sharing” arrangements for some states.

Even if eventually relocated, Kivalina might not be the first such community in the U.S. The Department of Housing and Urban Development [recently announced](#) \$ 96 million in funding to the state of Louisiana as part of the “National Disaster Resilience Competition,” much of which would go to a project called the “Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement.” The money would be used to relocate the [Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe](#), which has “seen a 98 percent loss of land since 1955,” according to HUD.

The 2014 National Climate Assessment [singled out](#) Isle de Jean Charles as an area where land subsidence, rising seas, and industrial activity had, in effect, wiped out an area that once contained much more land:

Around the world, climate change-inspired relocations are also already afoot. In the [Solomon Islands](#), a township is planning relocation due to rising seas, and in Fiji, one village has [already been relocated](#).

In the U.S., the problem with climate-related relocations is that while funding may now be emerging, there still isn’t a process in place to determine when communities should try to obtain it or how they should recognize that it is time for them to move, said Robin Bronen, executive director of the Alaska Institute for Justice, who is working on a NOAA-funded project on relocations.

“The funding absolutely provides a critical step towards making folks safe,” Bronen said. “But without that institutional framework and figuring out at what point in time communities need to start thinking about relocation, more communities will be in crisis because we haven’t figured out the process of how to protect people prior to there being an extreme weather event that permanently displaces them.”

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