

A Workshop with a Difference

Gathering two dozen people at UAF to collaborate on research is hardly unusual. But when half of them come from an isolated North Slope village almost 400 miles away, the situation becomes decidedly more unique.

That was the case in early June, when members of the Board of Directors of the Kuukpik Corporation – the Alaska Native Village Corporation for the community of Nuiqsut – met with scientists from the Alaska NSF EPSCoR Northern Test Case to discuss research in the region.

“We had some of the richest conversation I’ve experienced, where scientists shared what they knew and locals were adding to that and complementing it, and in some cases noting observations and knowledge of the system that the researchers didn’t have,” said Gary Kofinas, a UAF Professor of Resource Policy and Management and head of the Northern Test Case.

The June workshop was in some ways a culmination of the work of the test case, one of three interdisciplinary studies in different regions of Alaska being conducted by Alaska NSF EPSCoR. The goal of the statewide project is to better understand the capacity of different types of Alaskan communities to adapt to change, which makes Nuiqsut a natural fit: in addition to experiencing pronounced climate change due to its Arctic location, the 400-person mixed-subsistence village is also located near burgeoning oil and gas development.

“We talked about a changing landscape, including a focus on biophysical changes driven in part by climate change, and also by changes in land use,” Kofinas said.

“And as a part of that we talked about thawing permafrost, resulting in changes in hydrology and water runoff, how those changes affect fisheries, oil and gas development, and their impacts on land and people.”

A dozen Test Case researchers used the high-tech facilities at UAF’s Decision Theater North space to present on a wide variety of other topics as well, from shrubification’s effect on subsistence animals, to impacts of airplane overflights on the local soundscape, to the resilience of Nuiqsut’s economy. But research presentations were only one aspect of the meeting, which was designed as a two-way conversation about the attendees’ collective knowledge of change on the North Slope. Kofinas said the event constituted an effort to avoid what he termed “hit-and-run” research, in which scientists study an area without seeking local input into structuring the research, and without sharing results for the benefit of locals.

“We are increasingly interested in our research helping communities to make decisions, informing them, adding to their capacity to adapt to changes,” he said. “It’s also important in terms of learning from the people who live there, who have a perspective that’s at times very different that of researchers.”

To that end, the twelve members of the Kuukpik board in attendance were given ample opportunities to ask questions and, more importantly, to contribute their own observations of change. Kofinas said some of these related directly to the types of physical, biological and social science conducted by EPSCoR, but the input also included comments on subjects such as contaminants potentially being loosed by thawing permafrost and river erosion. One outcome of the meeting will be a summary report, and a tentative follow-up workshop is also planned. Kofinas said he expects another product of the meeting is personal relationships between researchers and Nuiqsut residents.

“For some of the researchers in this room, this was a first-time experience, hearing from people at the local level,” he said. “It’s pretty clear that a lot of the researchers were touched, and will think about how they can collaborate with community members and be sensitive to local needs when writing their next proposals. To do that, they now have personal relationships to build on.”



Gary Kofinas presents at the stakeholder workshop.

