

Is America Just Going to Abandon Its Towns Falling Into the Ocean?

By Stephen Lezak, *The New York Times*, January 4th, 2025

Almost a century after the Dust Bowl, America is on the cusp of another displacement crisis, this one caused primarily by climate change. While the Resettlement Administration was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to move communities to newly built towns, there is no such federal agency today to bear responsibility for helping communities relocate if they wish to do so. Policymakers have essentially abandoned those Americans who need to move to safety in the wake of losing their land.

Wealthy, dense cities such as New York, London and Venice have spent billions on elaborate infrastructure, but rural towns and villages generally lack the resources to build enormous sea walls or levees. Many of these communities will have no choice but to relocate.

The village of Shaktoolik, Alaska, where I've conducted research since 2022, is one such place. Its 250 residents, almost all of whom are Inupiaq, live on a bluish of land barely more than a sandbar on the storm-prone Bering Sea. There is no road along which residents could evacuate, nor a harbor where boats could safely dock during a storm. Instead, a short gravel airstrip is the primary connection between this community and the rest of North America. A 2009 government report described Shaktoolik as "imminently threatened" by coastal erosion and flooding.

When displacement is unplanned, it can shatter communities. Planned relocation, by contrast, allows communities to remain intact as they move collectively to safety. For Shaktoolik, that safe place would likely be the low-lying hills 12 miles away, set back from the eroding coastline but still within the tribe's homeland.

Because there is no one agency that coordinates relocations, communities must patch together funding from as many as 12 separate entities in Washington. In the last 25 years, just two American communities, both of them Indigenous, have cleared these hurdles. In December, the Biden administration recommended changes to the bureaucratic morass hindering community relocation. But it stopped short of instituting these recommendations, or taking the critical step of designating a single agency to lead on climate relocation.

Under the second Trump administration, leadership on community relocation will be a tough sell for Republican lawmakers looking to pay for tax cuts. But conservatives who are enthralled with the notion of efficiency should remember that it generally costs less in the long run to act than to wait until the damage is done.

To date, the general response to climate-vulnerable communities has been the policy equivalent of a shrug. But by failing to ensure that rural Americans can relocate, their futures become collateral damage in the political gridlock that haunts the climate crisis, while most government officials are safe behind sea walls and sophisticated flood defense systems.

Americans deserve better. What was clear to policymakers during the Dust Bowl should not be a matter of controversy or inaction today. Those communities that wish to relocate must be able to move to *terra firma* while remaining whole.