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Dr. Neil Jacobs
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere (Acting)
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

Dr. Louis W. Uccellini
Assistant Administrator for Weather Services
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

Dear Dr. Jacobs and Dr. Uccellini:

On May 14, 2020, the Alaska Departments of Natural Resources and Fish and Game announced the discovery of a large and potentially destructive landslide hazard at the head of Barry Arm, in Prince William Sound. The retreat of the Barry Glacier has exposed a significant deposit of unstable sediment and loose material, which could release millions of tons of rock into the waters of Barry Arm. A landslide of such magnitude in a narrow waterway could cause a devastating tsunami and impact communities nearby. The community of Whittier, Alaska, is most at risk from such an event.

Alaska is no stranger to geologic hazards or natural disasters. In 1964, a magnitude 9.2 earthquake struck the southcentral region, resulting in 131 fatalities and billions of dollars in damages. More recently, in November 2018, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake hit Anchorage, disrupting major transportation corridors and causing extensive damage. This followed another magnitude 7.9 event in January 2018, which provoked mass evacuations across the state. In addition to earthquakes, Alaska's history is punctuated with tsunamis, landslides, and volcanic eruptions, some of which have been recorded in the oral histories of Alaska Native communities.

In partnership with State agencies and research institutions, federal agencies play a key role in monitoring and predicting potential hazards before they cause widespread damage or loss of life. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) plays an especially important role in supporting both the physical instrumentation to capture hazardous tsunami events as they occur, and the public-facing infrastructure used to notify Alaskans when a disaster is imminent.

In light of the newly discovered hazard in Barry Arm, I write to request updates on the status of NOAA's tsunami observing capabilities in Prince William Sound, long term plans for monitoring the Barry Arm tsunami hazard, and a summary of recent improvements made to the tsunami warning system in Alaska. Specifically, I request a response which includes the following:

1. Please provide a timeframe for redeployment of National Data Buoy Center Station #46081 in Prince William Sound.
2. Please provide a long-term plan for monitoring non-seismic landslide-induced tsunamis in Prince William Sound, and in any other areas where such hazards may occur, such as southeast Alaska.
3. Please provide a timeline for when tsunami inundation maps for Prince William Sound communities will be updated, given the discovery of this new hazard.
4. Please provide an update on improvements made to the tsunami alert system to address shortcomings identified after the November 2018 earthquake, the January 2018 earthquake, and the false alert event in May 2018.

NOAA's tsunami observation and prediction capabilities are critical to safeguarding the lives and property of Alaskans. As Alaska experiences deglaciation brought on by climate change, it is likely that new landslide hazards similar to the one in Barry Arm will be discovered. I urge you to devote any available resources to improving observation capabilities in Prince William Sound and ensuring that the U.S. Tsunami Warning System is capable of rapidly notifying at-risk communities, like Whittier.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator