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## In rural Alaska, a long-televised weather show will stop airing this month

By Kay Nolan

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*A house floats in the Snake River near Nome, Alaska, on Sept. 17 after the remnants of Typhoon Merbok moved into the Bering Sea region. (Peggy Fagerstrom/AP)*

In much of Alaska, where internet service is slow or missing, and brutal weather can frequently be life-threatening, a plan to disband a long-televised daily weather report is causing anguish and concerns about access to critical information.

“Oh no! I hope they don’t,” said Chariton Epchook of the village of Kwethluk along the state’s southwest coast. “Checking the weather daily is very important for planning purposes when we’re out trying to live off the land and water.”

Epchook is among many thousands of rural Alaskans who live in areas with almost no roads, and whose livelihoods depend on fishing, hunting sea mammals, including whales and planting and harvesting berries. Residents often travel hours to reach fishing areas or “berry camps” and typically use open, flat-bottomed boats to do so by river. To reach medical services in larger towns, shop for supplies or even to get to some schools, many families rely on small airplanes. Excessive winds can swamp both types of transportation. Unexpected warming endangers boats and snowmobiles traveling on frozen rivers.

Anchorage-based Alaska Public Media recently [announced](#) it will discontinue its nightly half-hour TV show, “Alaska Weather,” at the end of the month. The show, which includes two segments devoted to aviation and marine weather, along with an overall weather segment, has aired daily since 1976. Starting July 1, the report, produced by local National Weather Service meteorologists, will instead be uploaded to YouTube. Officials from Alaska Public Media, which packages and distributes the segment produced by the local weather service, said the cuts were made for financial reasons.

Linda Wei, its chief content officer, told The Washington Post it’s possible a version of the critical weather program could be revived down the road. Meanwhile, some residents are hoping for outside funding that could help keep the segment on the air.

For now, the problem for many residents is that much of Alaska lacks reliable broadband internet service even under ideal conditions. Its vulnerability to outages was underscored last week, when sea ice [damaged](#) a major underwater fiber-optic cable, cutting internet and cellphone service — likely for months — to Nome and multiple other communities in north and northwest Alaska. Even where it’s available, many rural Alaskans cannot afford to pay for the amount of data needed to stream YouTube shows.

“Most of the people here are below poverty level — plus, the majority of them aren’t tech-savvy,” said Mylon Kingeekuk, who lives in Savoonga, an island community of about 900 people off the coast of Nome.

Generations of Alaskans are still living much as they did years ago, he said, and that lifestyle still includes gathering around the TV at 5:30 p.m. to watch Alaska Weather.

“You can tell when Alaska Weather is on TV in a home because everyone has to be quiet,” said Mark Springer, a Coast Guard veteran who moved to Alaska in 1976, married and raised six children in the Yup’ik village of Hooper Bay. Last fall, the unexpectedly severe remnants of a [typhoon](#) walloped the Hooper Bay area, reinforcing Springer’s belief that weather warnings save lives.

Alaska ranks first in the nation in [drowning deaths](#), many caused by flooding or vehicles falling through ice.

“Coastal people, they really watch the weather or they’ll be in a lot of trouble,” said Epchook, adding that poor weather planning can also be economically devastating.

“Right now, it’s fishing season. Families watch forecasts for spans of drying time,” he added. “When it’s raining for days on end, it’s not good for drying, and we have to take extra care of what we catch in order for it not to get spoiled and we have to throw it away.”

Benjamin Mallott, a spokesman for the Alaska Federation of Natives, said the organization is trying to reach members of its 228 federally recognized tribes, with the news, as the loss of the weather report significantly affects this population, but is resorting to word-of-mouth, because so many members don’t or can’t use social media.



*A view of downtown Juneau in the Tongass National Forest. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)*

The vastness and ruggedness of Alaska, with its mountains and valleys, makes access to cellphone, internet and cable service challenging. Many Alaskan homes only get two or three television channels. A company called Alaska Rural Communications Service, or ARCS, compiles popular sports and other commercial TV shows from ABC, NBC and public television onto a “variety” channel. Access to cable television was largely [discontinued](#) in 2021 by the state’s primary internet provider, GCI. Rural residents say GCI internet costs between \$200 and \$300 a month.

Satellite internet [became available last November](#) in parts of Alaska through Elon Musk’s Starlink service. Epchook said he recently signed up for Starlink for about \$100 a month, but said service has sometimes been spotty.

Wei said the weather show is produced at a local NWS office, which sends the segments electronically to her station, where they are assembled into a half-hour format that

includes prerecorded opening and closing footage and links between the show's segments. Alaska Public Media then sends the entire, finished show to public media stations KTOO in Juneau and KUAC in Fairbanks, which, in turn, broadcast it to their own viewers and forward it, via ARCS, to rural viewers. Alaska Public Radio stopped airing Alaska Weather in 2018 and no longer allows NWS meteorologists to use its studios.

After significant [state funding cuts](#) in 2019, Alaska Public Media continued to assemble and distribute the show, said Wei.

“We’ve been doing this, without support, for about four or five years, and we’ve made that known to NOAA,” said Wei, referring to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency for the National Weather Service. “It just got to the point where we couldn’t continue doing that.”

Wei said she’s open to restoring “a different iteration of Alaska Weather,” if there was a product that cost less “on our end” or could be delivered directly to Juneau and Fairbanks.

“Right now, I’m interpreting this time as an evaluation period,” said Wei. “I don’t think this is the end of Alaska Weather. There’s still very much need for the services NOAA provides. I’ve offered ideas, like, does it need to be a half-hour? Can it be interstitial in length or like, between programs? That would make things easier for us to distribute.” “If they’re amenable to that, I’d like to have that conversation,” said Carrie Haisley, the chief NWS meteorologist for Alaska Weather. “This is the first I’ve heard of them saying they’d be amenable to doing anything with us.”

Kelli Burkinshaw, content and operations manager at KTOO-TV, said her station retains a strong commitment to air the weather show, noting that many viewers turned to KTOO after Alaska Public Media dropped it.

“We’ll work with [NWS] as much as we can,” said Burkinshaw. “If they could give us a fully ready, end-to-end show, even without the filler in between, I’d air that 20-minute show.”

Springer, a former mayor of Bethel, Alaska, a city of over 6,000 residents, hopes local philanthropists step up.

“I’m astonished that Alaska Public Media can’t make the case to organizations for fundraising” to retain the weather show, he said.

Whether it’s fishing, hunting, clam digging or riding snow machines for 100-mile stretches, “we exist in the environment,” Springer said. “The only thing standing between the average Alaskan and the outdoor environment is the clothes on their back, and Alaska Weather helps us know which clothes to wear tomorrow.”