



We use health impact assessments to protect the health of communities.

Alaska has considerable natural resource wealth. Oil, natural gas, coal, and gold are found in quantities significant enough to bring industry into remote areas. Alaska is also a state in which many people rely on the foods they can hunt, fish, and gather from the wilderness around them. What happens when a mining or drilling project is proposed in territory that is a rich source of subsistence foods? Will the project disrupt wildlife or poison the soil and water? Also, what might be the positive health impacts that are made possible by the economic benefits of a development project?

In situations like this, a tool called Health Impact Assessment (HIA) can help people understand how their community's health could be affected by a development project. As the CDC website describes it, ["HIA is a process that helps evaluate the potential health effects of a plan, project or policy before it is built or implemented."](#) Currently, HIA is not required by state or federal laws, but HIA is recognized as "best practice," and can be included as part of required environmental impact assessments.

The [HIA Program in the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services](#) is a resource to those companies who want to conduct HIA as part of their permitting process. This office was created in 2010 and grew out of a shared sense among governmental, tribal, and business groups that having an institutionalized process for HIA was desirable.

HIA can be conducted any time in the life-cycle of a project, but it is advantageous for HIA to be done at the beginning and move along with environmental impact studies. Paul Anderson, HIA Program Manager for the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services says, "We'll jump right in the mix with those doing the fieldwork. We use the work of others as appropriate, but will figure out where the data gaps are and then work to fill these gaps."

One of the companies involved in the work group that recommended the creation of an institutionalized HIA Program for Alaska was Barrick Gold, a company that wanted to develop the [Donlin Gold](#) project, a gold mine in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. Mary Sattler is Manager of Community Development and Sustainability for Donlin Gold. When asked about her desire to be involved in the HIA process, she says, "I'm from the region where this project is being proposed, so I wanted a high degree of comfort with the development. It was important to me that we really thought through what this project would mean for people."

The HIA process fully explores concerns people in the area of a project want to address. Anderson says, "We tell community members if they have a concern, it doesn't need to be backed up with reams of data before we take it seriously. What they have to say will be included as a concern in our work. We want them to know that their voice will be heard for human health." Sattler agrees, "When I work in communities in the project area, I sense a lot of relief that a human health impact assessment is being done."

Among the top concerns for the Donlin Gold project were mercury poisoning and disrupted gathering of subsistence foods. Field testing focused on these concerns. HIA contractors collected hair samples collected from volunteers to determine baseline mercury amounts, and a subsistence survey was conducted in partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

In addition to showing where a proposed development might pose environmental risk to humans, the HIA can also record baseline data on social variables such as current rates of drug and alcohol abuse. In the case of the HIA for the Donlin Gold project, data on substance use rates was collected. While many might assume that development exacerbates existing rates, it may be that workers who are required to stay "clean and sober" to remain employed might make healthier choices when it comes to substance use. Because baseline data on substance use was part of the HIA for Donlin Gold, it will be possible to know what effect, if any, the project is having on substance use rates.

Anderson says, "When it comes to developing resources, conversations can become difficult and political. The HIA process helps all sides move toward collaboration. HIA is not about a regulator looking at a project, rather it's about the people involved looking at all the different aspects of the situation together."