

GUIDELINES

Laws and Protocols Pertaining to the Discovery of Human Remains in Alaska

The treatment of human remains following inadvertent discovery is governed by state and federal laws, land status, postmortem interval (time since death), and biological/cultural affiliation. First and foremost, the site of discovered remains should be regarded a potential “crime scene” until a person with appropriate expertise and authority determines otherwise.

State Laws:

Several State laws are applicable to the discovery of human remains in Alaska. The State Medical Examiner (SME) has jurisdiction over all human remains in the state (with rare exceptions, such as military aircraft deaths), regardless of age.

AS 12.65.5 requires immediate notification of a peace officer of the state (police, Village Public Safety Officer, or Alaska State Trooper [AST]) and the State Medical Examiner when death has “been caused by unknown or criminal means, during the commission of a crime, or by suicide, accident, or poisoning.”

In this regard, contact the Alaska State Trooper/Missing Persons Bureau first. (See list of contacts on following page.) The AST has interpreted notification procedures as applicable to all remains, including ancient remains.

AS 11.46.482(a)(3), which applies to all lands in Alaska, makes the “intentional and unauthorized destruction or removal of any human remains or the intentional disturbance of a grave” a class C felony.

AS 41.35.200, which applies only to State lands, makes the disturbance of "historic, prehistoric and archeological resources" (including graves, per definition) a class A misdemeanor.

AS 18.50.250, which applies to all lands in Alaska, requires permits for the disinterment, transport, and reinterment of human remains. Guidance and permits are available from the Bureau of Vital Statistics (see attached list of contacts).

Federal Laws:

On Federal lands and Federal trust lands, the unauthorized destruction or removal of archaeological human remains (i.e., more than 100 years old) is a violation of **16 USC 470ee** (Archeological Resources Protection Act). If human remains on federal or federal trust lands are determined to be Native American, their treatment and disposition are also governed by the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 (**PL 101-601; 25 USC 3001-30013**; 104 Stat. 3048-3058; 43 CFR 10). NAGPRA also applies to Native American human remains from any lands if the remains are curated in any institution that receives federal funds.

General Guidance:

Your first contacts should be the AST/Missing Persons Bureau, the Alaska State Medical Examiner’s Office, local law enforcement, the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, and the landowner.

In many instances, the field archaeologist must make a judgement call regarding the age of the remains, his/her level of confidence in the evaluation, and whether further investigation by a specialist is warranted. While notification under State Law is required, peace officers and the SME generally regard archaeologists competent to make these type determinations and welcome input that may assist with the investigation. With regard to ancient remains (> 100 years old), the SME and AST will generally defer to the opinion of the field archaeologist and require no further criminal investigation. However, the remains and a surrounding buffer area should not be disturbed until appropriate reporting and consultation have occurred.

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**CONTACT INFORMATION FOR STATE OFFICIALS INVOLVED WITH HUMAN
REMAINS ISSUES IN ALASKA**

**Denotes suggested contact person in list below.*

1.) Alaska State Troopers, Missing Persons Bureau:

Phone: (907) 269-5477
Fax: (907) 338-7243

Sgt. Kid Chan

Phone: (907) 269-5058
e-mail: choong.chan@alaska.gov

*Stephanie Johnson

Phone: (907) 269-5497
e-mail: steph.johnson@alaska.gov

*After contact by phone, send e-mail with relevant information and photos to Sgt. Chan and Stephanie Johnson.

2.) Alaska State Medical Examiner's Office:

* Reporting Hotline (Death Hotline) to speak with on-duty investigator.

Phone: (907) 334-2356
1-888-332-3273 (Outside Anchorage)

Stephen Hoage, Operations Administrator

Phone: (907) 334-2202
Fax: (907) 334-2216
e-mail: stephen.hoage@alaska.gov

Dr. Gary Zientek, Chief Medical Examiner

Phone: (907) 334-2200
Fax: (907) 334-2216
e-mail: gary.zientek@alaska.gov

3.) Alaska Office of History and Archaeology (State Historic Preservation Office):

Judith E. Bittner, Chief / State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO)

Phone: (907) 269-8721
Fax: (907) 269-8908
E-mail: judy.bittner@alaska.gov

*Dr. Richard VanderHoek, State Archaeologist / Deputy SHPO

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Fax: (907) 269-8908
E-mail: richard.vanderhoek@alaska.gov

Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

Heidi Lengdorfer, Chief

Phone: (907) 465-8643
e-mail: heidi.lengdorfer@alaska.gov

For questions regarding disinterment permits or burial transit permits:

Margo Meyer

Phone: (907) 465-8610
e-mail: margo.meyer@alaska.gov