

Old BIA Copper Center School Site



Introduction

The Old BIA Copper Center School Site is a 2.16-acre property located at 61.972317° North latitude and 145.319573° West longitude, within Lot 2, Section 12, Township 2N, Range 1W of the Copper River Meridian in Alaska. The land is owned by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR), while the remaining structures are owned by the Native Village of Kluti-Kaah (NVKK). The site is situated approximately 1.4 miles north of the Copper Center village center and 160 miles northeast of Anchorage.



Centrally positioned within the Kluti-Kaah village, it lies between the tribe's former and historic Tribal Hall and a restored church that houses a tribal cemetery. The property is relatively flat, with a slight slope downward to the east toward the Copper River, which is located just 200 feet from the site.

Historically, this site served as a central community school, but it has since become a long-standing concern for NVKK due to its physical deterioration and potential environmental hazards. Many tribal members once attended school here and have since reported negative health effects. The site holds significant historical and cultural importance for Kluti-Kaah and remains a top priority for assessment, cleanup, and potential revitalization.

History



The Old BIA Copper Center School Site has been in use since at least 1905, when it was developed as a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school. The main school building and associated generator structure, believed to have been constructed in the 1950s, served the educational needs of the Native Village of Kluti-Kaah (NVKK) until the late 1970s or early 1980s, when the site was abandoned. During its operation, the site also included a diesel aboveground storage tank (AST) for heat and power and three prefabricated annex classrooms installed in the mid-1970s and removed by the mid-1980s.

Initially owned by the U.S. Department of the Interior, site ownership transferred to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR) in 1960, with the school building deeded to the Copper Center Village Council (now NVKK) in 1983. Since its closure, the site has remained unused, though it holds deep historical and cultural significance for the NVKK and the surrounding community.

Previous Activities

2010 Environmental Site Assessment

In 2010, BGES, Inc. conducted a Phase I and limited Phase II Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) at the former BIA School Site in Copper Center, Alaska, along with a Hazardous Building Material Inventory (HBMI) for the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. The assessment identified significant contamination and hazardous building materials at the former BIA School Site.



Soil sampling near the site's former aboveground storage tank (AST) revealed diesel-range organics (DRO) concentrations exceeding the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) cleanup criteria for migration to groundwater - indicating localized petroleum contamination. The HBMI revealed widespread presence of deteriorated asbestos-containing building materials (ACBMs) and lead-based paint (LBP) throughout the building.

2023 Targeted Brownfields Assessment

In 2023, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 10 Targeted Brownfields Assessment Program, in partnership with Eastern Research Group, Inc. (ERG) and the Copper River Native Association (CRNA), conducted a new assessment of the Old BIA Copper Center School Site. The assessment concluded that contamination conditions at the site had changed significantly since 2010. Unlike the 2010 findings, the 2023 Phase II did not detect petroleum-contaminated soil near the former AST, suggesting that previously identified contamination may have naturally degraded over time. Elevated levels of mercury and arsenic were found in isolated soil and groundwater samples but are considered likely naturally occurring. Lead concentrations exceeding ADEC standards were identified in surface soils along the building dripline, likely due to weathered lead-based paint. Additionally, hazardous building materials identified in 2010—including deteriorated asbestos-containing materials and lead-based paint—remain present on-site and continue to pose a significant risk to both human health and the environment. The assessment confirmed that while some contamination has diminished, the building materials remain a key concern and must be addressed in any future redevelopment or demolition activities.

Current Activities



As of August 2025, the Old BIA Copper Center School site has finally been fully cleaned up after decades of effort — a milestone that marks the end of a long and complex process. Led by the CRNA TCS Environmental Program, the project involved the safe removal of hazardous building materials, including asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) and lead-based paint, by certified professionals in strict compliance with regulatory standards. Following abatement, the deteriorated structures were demolished, and all debris and waste were removed. The final phase focused on remediating contaminated soil, ensuring the property is now completely free of hazardous contamination.

This achievement is a major step forward for the community, not only eliminating long-standing environmental and safety risks but also paving the way for the revitalization of a site that holds deep historical and cultural significance.

Future Use



The Native Village of Kluti-Kaah envisions returning the Old BIA Copper Center School Site to a natural green space that reflects the land’s historical, cultural, and ecological significance. Located at the heart of the village, between the Tribe’s Former and Historical Tribal Hall and the restored church with its adjacent tribal cemetery, the site holds deep ancestral and community value. Following the removal of hazardous structures and environmental contaminants, the Tribe plans to allow the land to revert to its natural state to support ecological restoration and subsistence use. As a subsistence community, Kluti-Kaah seeks to restore the area for the safe harvesting of traditional foods—such as berries, fish, moose, and other wildlife—that may have been impacted by past contamination. This revitalization plan not only supports environmental and public health but also strengthens cultural resilience, food security, and self-sufficiency for current and future generations.