



October 7, 2024

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dan Sullivan
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mary Peltola
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Murkowski, Senator Sullivan and Representative Peltola:

On behalf of Petersburg Borough, I am writing to express our serious concern over a proposed rule by OSHA (“Emergency Response Standard” issued on February 2 of this year) that if finalized in its current form would have a devastating impact on our small, rural volunteer-based fire and emergency services department.

The rule is intended to replace the existing OSHA Fire Brigade Standard to reduce the risk of occupational hazards experienced by fire and emergency responders. While well-intended, unfortunately the proposed rule takes a too broad approach and doesn’t recognize the differences and ability to comply between larger, well-resourced, professionally paid urban fire and emergency services departments and smaller, volunteer-based like ours in Petersburg and those in most communities in Alaska.

Our Department has 3 employees and 78 volunteers with an annual budget of \$813,441. We are proud of our work and ability to respond to the fires and emergencies that are typical for a community of our size, but we are not set up to handle certain types of emergencies that larger communities periodically have to address, nor do we need to, given our population, rural location, average home and building size and numbers. Yet the rule is structured to apply without making these distinctions.

Here are examples of some of the difficulties the proposed rule would present to Petersburg.

- Completion of a 180 hour plus Firefighter 1 course that would cover fire response that our volunteers will never face in our rural, non-industrial community, such as a large chemical spill response and clean up. Furthermore, our volunteers cannot afford to take off over 4 weeks of work in order to complete the course.
- Equipment modernization standards that would mean the immediate retirement of two of our fire engines, water tanker, search and rescue truck and emergency squad vehicle, with another forced replacement of another engine and one of our two ambulances within 5 years. The cost of replacement of these expensive vehicles is well-beyond our means. Current rates for fire engines sized for our community range from \$850,000 -to \$1,000,000 for reference.
- Fire fighter driver’s licensing is based on a Fire Fighter 2 standard, not just for our large trucks but for any fire vehicle, including support vehicles and our ambulances. Most of our volunteers and personnel

are trained with an internal course based on our unique community. The extra coursework from a Driver/Operator course is cumbersome and addresses things that will never be faced within the Petersburg Borough.

- Turnout gear (fire protective clothing) retirement 10 years from date of purchase. Much of our turnout gear has been lightly used and in sound condition but is over that threshold. Full replacement would cost approximately \$6,000 per set of turnout gear which is a significant sum for our small department. That does not include the additional PPE requirements for our EMS and Search and Rescue departments, based on threats they will never face.
- Costly annual medical screenings that would be required for each volunteer to have annually. Our local hospital is not capable of performing these screenings and therefore to remain in compliance with the new standard, we would incur additional cost for travel and lodging to send the volunteers to where they could be completed. This removes responders from service when they are out of town for these screenings and also burdens them with missed work just to be able to help their community.

Lastly, the rule only covers States that have pre-existing OSHA State-approved plans. This includes Alaska but not approximately 40 percent of the country's other States and territories. There is a fairness argument to be made here, or at least some deference to our State to develop State-based standards that would recognize the small and rural nature of most of the communities in Alaska in developing a standard that is reasonable and makes sense.

The public comment period closed in July. Many National and Alaska based emergency organizations have written letters opposing these changes as they are proposed to be implemented. OSHA will hold a public hearing November 12, 2024. Our concern is that OSHA will finalize the rule in the closing days of the current administration without significant engagement from Congress. Small rural departments like ours should receive an exemption, or at least a partial exemption and phased in compliance schedule for many of the requirements in the rule. We ask that you support the Fire Service both in Petersburg and other departments across this state in developing effective, safe and achievable standards to keep volunteer response organizations in operation for years to come.

Thank you for your consideration of these views, and for your support for Petersburg Borough and our residents.

Sincerely,

Mark Jensen
Petersburg Borough Mayor

Cc: Senator Burt Stedman
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Nils Andreassen, Alaska Municipal League
Robert Venables, Southeast Conference