

[Close this window](#)[Print this page](#)

Tanana Chiefs Conference, Alaska Center for Energy and Power study rural energy solutions

By [Christopher Eshleman](#)

Published Wednesday, June 3, 2009

FAIRBANKS — A research center and an Alaska Native consortium announced last month that they'll form a partnership and explore ways to wean Interior villages from an expensive dependence on oil power.

The project will take a community-by-community approach toward hooking villages — up to 42 under the jurisdiction of Tanana Chiefs Conference — to alternative energy projects, according to the announcement, made jointly by TCC the Alaska Center for Energy and Power.

Mike Smith, a resource-management director for TCC, said his agency also is thinking of helping the University of Alaska Fairbanks — the energy center's home base — finance construction of a proposed technology-research building.

Smith said the two agencies have yet to finalize paperwork for the "jointly managed and funded" research project. He said both avenues — the alternative research project and the prospect of constructing a new building for the energy center — would blend the center's research experience with TCC's access to resources. That includes the potential of millions of dollars in federal funding.

"By combining the community-organizing skills and representation of TCC with the university's technical and scientific expertise, we're confident we can achieve long-term sustainable energy solutions for rural Alaska," Smith said in a news release.

The region represented by Tanana Chiefs covers 42 communities and, as noted by the groups in a news release, is rich in feedstock for geothermal, biomass, wind and other potential alternative energy projects.

Gwen Holdmann, an organizational director for the energy center, said the research project will aim to create solutions at the community level and integrate them in a region-wide plan. The agency said it hopes to use the partnership as a model for other regions of Alaska.

Smith said TCC noticed a wave of interest in "solutions" for rural communities' heavy dependence on oil, which started two years ago with rising energy prices and the state Legislature's decision to fund alternative-energy projects. He said he senses that knee-jerk interest, which followed a huge but temporary spike in oil prices, has dried up, and TCC is looking to "long-term solutions and agreements" to keep the momentum going.

Smith said rural Alaska has the highest energy costs in the country. "This was important to TCC," he said of research focused on his villages' energy needs.

The university had sought this winter to find funding for the proposed energy-technology building — last estimated at \$30 million and 31,000-square-feet — to provide a home for the year-old energy center. The Legislature adjourned without first passing a measure UAF leaders said they needed to begin construction this fall.