HUMAN REMAINS AND CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN ALASKA: STATE LAWS AND GUIDELINES

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ABSTRACT

The treatment of human remains following inadvertent discovery is governed by state and federal laws, land status, time since death, and biological/cultural affiliation. In many instances, a field anthropologist (usually an archaeologist) must make a judgment regarding the age of the remains, his or her level of confidence in the evaluation, and whether further investigation by a specialist is warranted. The anthropologist must comply with legal requirements before further disturbing the remains. State law, which does not differentiate remains on the basis of biological/cultural affiliation or time since death, requires certain notifications, permits, and operating procedures. The disturbance of remains, graves, monuments, or associated items without authorization is a felony under state law, regardless of land ownership. Federal laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) supersede but do not replace human remains requirements under state law. Recently, state agencies involved with human remains issues attempted to provide consistency in operating procedures by completing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that sets forth operating definitions, describes permit requirements, provides for consultation, and defines certain steps that agency officials or individuals should follow when reporting human remains.

KEYWORDS: cemetery, osteology, legal protocol, human remains

INTRODUCTION

No cultural resource management topic is more sensitive than that involving human remains, graves, and funerary objects. Despite perceived differences of opinion over the treatment of the dead between anthropologists and some community members, current values and goals of respect for the dead are shared. In Alaska, the treatment and disposition of human remains and funerary objects, while not devoid of disagreement and poor past practices, has not generated the same level of controversy as in other states. This relative lack of controversy is likely due to a combi-

nation of increased cultural awareness; appropriate consultation between developers, anthropologists, and Native groups; treatment of all human remains with dignity and respect; willingness to compromise; and planning in the event of human remains being discovered during public construction.

To fully understand the issues associated with human remains discoveries and treatment in the context of cultural resource management, it is necessary to understand past and underlying legal principles as well as current laws and guidelines. This article discusses each of these areas as they relate to legal and practical requirements in Alaska. The primary focus is on state laws and guidelines as opposed to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which is discussed here only in the context of inadvertent discoveries on federal lands, federally restricted lands (i.e., Alaska Native allotments), and federal trust lands.

THE LAW OF THE DEAD IN LEGAL CONTEXT

LEGAL OVERVIEW

The "law of the dead" has traditionally been administered by individual states under either a coroner system or a state medical examiner system. Most states have statutes founded on English Common Law, the original intent of which was to prohibit the desecration of human remains and graves within church cemeteries. In the past few decades, partly due to complaints of inconsistent enforcement by state courts, the federal government intervened with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which recognizes the rights of Native Americans and Hawaiian peoples to control the disposition of the skeletal remains of their ancestors. NAGPRA supersedes but does not negate state law (that is, both the state and federal laws must be met, but if there is a conflict the federal law takes precedent over state laws).

It is important to note that the inadvertent discovery clause in NAGPRA is limited to only Native American or Native Hawaiian remains located on federal lands, federally controlled lands, or tribal lands (see definitions in NAGPRA Regulations 43 CFR 10.2.f.1–2). In Alaska, federally controlled lands include the more than 81 mil-

lion hectares of federal lands, as well as federally restricted properties such as Native allotments. Native corporation patented lands are regarded as private lands¹ and are *not* covered under NAGPRA. However, inadvertent discoveries on Native allotments are covered under NAGPRA.

There is a common misconception that the inadvertent discovery clause in NAGPRA is linked to federal funding and permits regardless of land ownership. NAGPRA applies only to inadvertent discoveries on federal or federally restricted lands, but the section of NAGPRA concerning museum collections does apply to Native human remains and associated items in any institution that receives federal funds, regardless of when or where the human remains were recovered.

Concurrent with strengthening federal laws during the past two decades, many state governments have also strengthened their human remains statutes and regulations. In some instances, these state laws provide important protective measures beyond the scope of NAGPRA. In Alaska, state criminal law protects all human remains and burials in the state, regardless of ethnicity, race, or the location of their discovery (AS11.46.482(a)(3)).²

HISTORIC LEGAL CONTEXT FOR THE TREATMENT OF HUMAN REMAINS IN ALASKA

In Alaska, the first synthesis of laws regarding human remains and graves was published as part of a report on the Utkiavik site, BAR-00002 (Smith 1984).³ This article documented the discovery of ancient frozen bodies and skeletal remains in a crushed semisubterranean house at Barrow. The discovery of human remains (complete and partial bodies) rather than the skeletal remains usually discovered in archaeological contexts raised questions about jurisdiction, legal definitions, treatment, and disposition

- 1 As defined in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).
- 2 AS Title 11. Criminal Law

AS Chapter 11.46. Offences against property

AS Section 11.46.482. Criminal mischief in the third degree

- (a) A person commits the crime of criminal mischief in the third degree if, having no right to do so or any reasonable ground to believe the person has such a right,
 - (3) the person knowingly
 - (A) defaces, damages, or desecrates a cemetery or the contents of a cemetery or a tomb, grave, or memorial regardless of whether the tomb, grave, or memorial is in a cemetery or whether the cemetery, tomb, grave, or memorial appears to be abandoned, lost, or neglected;
 - (B) removes human remains or associated burial artifacts from a cemetery, tomb, grave, or memorial regardless of whether the cemetery, tomb, grave, or memorial appears to be abandoned, lost, or neglected.
- 3 Frederick H. Smith was a coroner with the Alaska Court System, Fourth Judicial District, Fairbanks.

within Alaska's legal framework. While there have been substantive changes to the legal framework at both the state and federal level since 1984,⁴ the article remains a valuable contribution to our understanding of the "law of the dead" from an Alaska legal perspective (Smith 1984:142). According to Smith, the "prevailing view [in 1984] and the rule in Alaska is that all human remains found in an archaeological context, such as those discovered in Utquiagvik site in Barrow," are legally "dead bodies" (Smith 1984:145).⁵ He further noted that a death certificate is needed only when the remains are "a lifeless human body or parts or bones of it from the state of which it reasonably may be concluded that death recently occurred" (AS 18.50.950(6)).⁶

Smith also addresses the concept of dead bodies as property. He concludes that human remains are not property in the true sense of property (with its associated connotation of ownership), but are treated as "quasi property" (Smith 1984:145). The property concept is based in part on the fact that there is a legal custodian for a body. This is typically the surviving spouse, then the next of kin. If there is no surviving next of kin, then the public has the right to possess the body for purposes of burial. Under existing law, the state medical examiner represents the public as the legal custodian of the body and is responsible for the disposition of unclaimed or unknown remains (AS 12.65.100).⁷

Alaska statutes treat graves and human remains as property for purposes of protection against damage under criminal law. This idea of property damage associated with the disturbance of grave sites and/or human remains is based on traditional European views of the dead. The concept of gravesites and human remains as property is not a universally shared idea, but has been incorporated

into the present legal system to facilitate the protection of human remains, grave sites, and memorials under property law. In this sense, the basic premise of how graves and human remains are protected under state law differs from that of NAGPRA. Alaska law treats graves and human remains solely as a property issue, whereas NAGPRA treats Native graves and human remains as a civil rights issue as well as a property issue.

At the time of Smith's article, Alaska's medico-legal framework was based on a regional coroner system. In 1994, Alaska replaced the coroner system with a centralized medical examiner system. At the same time, statutes and regulations were modified to transfer authorities formerly vested in coroners to the Office of the State Medical Examiner, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

CURRENT ALASKA STATE LAWS AND HUMAN REMAINS

Several state laws are directly applicable to the discovery and treatment of human remains in Alaska. They identify jurisdictions, duties, notification requirements, permits, and criminal acts. The state medical examiner has jurisdiction over all human remains investigations in the state regardless of when the death occurred, with rare exceptions such as military aircraft deaths and certain federal jurisdictions.

DISTURBANCE OF GRAVES, MONUMENTS, AND HUMAN REMAINS

Before 2001, graves and human remains in Alaska that were outside NAGPRA jurisdiction were protected

AS Chapter 18.50. Vital Statistics Act

AS Section 18.50.950. Definitions

In this chapter, (6) "dead body" means a lifeless human body or parts or bones of it from the state of which it reasonably may be concluded that death recently occurred.

7 AS Title 12. Code of Criminal Procedures

AS Chapter 12.65. Death Investigations and the Medical Examiners

AS Section 12.65.100. Unclaimed bodies

When a person dies and no person appears to claim the body for burial, and no provision is made for the body under AS 13.52, the Department of Health and Social Services, upon notification, shall request a court order authorizing the body to be plainly and decently buried or cremated and the remains decently interred. A judicial officer shall issue the requested order upon the sworn testimony or statement of a representative of the Department of Health and Social Services that a person has not appeared to claim the body for burial and provision is not made for the body under AS 13.52.

⁴ Two significant changes have been the replacement of the coroner-based system by a state medical examiner system and the change in the law so that knowingly disturbing graves has become a felony instead of a misdemeanor.

⁵ This view of the dead has not changed since 1984.

⁶ AS Title 18. Health, Safety, and Housing

primarily under the Alaska Historic Preservation Act (AS 41.35.200, AHPA) in the natural resources section of the Alaska Statutes. Unauthorized disturbance was a misdemeanor offense, as are all offenses covered under the unlawful acts (AS 41.34.200) section of the AHPA. The language in AS 41.35.200 was worded in such a way that it was unclear as to whether the law applied to all lands in the state or only to state-owned lands. Aside from the AHPA, human remains were only protected under the concepts grounded in English common law. This meant that graves had little or no protection unless they were in a church cemetery.

AS 11.46.482(a)(3), enacted in October 2001, moved the section of the AHPA that protects graves and human remains (AS 41.35.200(c))8 into the criminal law section of the Alaska Statutes under "Offenses Against Property." The law, which also applies to "burial artifacts" and "memorials," makes the "intentional and unauthorized destruction or removal of any human remains or the intentional disturbance of a grave" by an unauthorized person a class C felony. AS 11.46.482(a)(3) substantially strengthens the statutory language that protects human remains and graves, clearly applies jurisdiction to both private and public lands, and elevates the crime from a class A misdemeanor to a class C felony. Sufficient language has been retained in AS 41.35.200 to still include the disturbance of graves, included in the statutory definition of "historic, prehistoric and archeological resources," as a misdemeanor offense.

NOTIFICATION OF HUMAN REMAINS DISCOVERIES

AS 12.65.005(a)(1)9 requires immediate notification of a peace officer of the state (police officer, village public safety officer, or Alaska state trooper) and the state medical examiner when the cause of death is unknown and/or the result of a possible suicide or accident. The state troopers have interpreted these notification procedures as applicable to all remains, including ancient remains. In addition to a local peace officer (if within a local jurisdiction) or the state troopers (if outside a local jurisdiction), formal notification should include the state troopers, Alaska Bureau of Investigation, formerly known as the Criminal Investigation Bureau. The Alaska Bureau of Investigation Missing Persons Bureau maintains a confidential database of all reported human remains discovery sites. Inclusion of ancient remains in the database not only allows the state troopers to avoid unnecessary criminal investigations, but may protect known ancient remains from additional disturbance. Alaska Statute 12.65.005 also establishes the duties of the state medical examiner and requirements for notification when remains are discovered.

DISINTERMENT, RELOCATION, AND REINTERMENT OF HUMAN REMAINS

AS 18.50.250¹⁰ requires that anyone seeking to remove, relocate, transport, or rebury human remains must se-

AS Chapter 41.35 Historic Preservation

AS Section 41.35.200. Unlawful acts

AS Chapter 12.65. Death Investigations and Medical Examiners

AS Section 12.65.005. Duty to notify state medical examiner

⁸ AS Title 41. Public Resources

⁽a) A person may not appropriate, excavate, remove, injure, or destroy, without a permit from the commissioner, any historic, prehistoric, or archeological resources of the state.

⁽b) A person may not possess, sell, buy, or transport within the state, or offer to sell, buy, or transport within the state, historic, prehistoric, or archeological resources taken or acquired in violation of this section or 16 U.S.C. 433.

⁽c) [Repealed, Sec. 3 ch 83 SLA 2001].

⁽d) An historic, prehistoric, or archeological resource that is taken in violation of this section shall be seized by any person designated in AS 41.35.220 wherever found and at any time. Objects seized may be disposed of as the commissioner determines by deposit in the proper public depository.

⁹ AS Title 12. Code of Criminal Procedure

⁽a) Unless the person has reasonable grounds to believe that notice has already been given, a person who attends a death or has knowledge of a death, in addition to notifying a peace officer, shall immediately notify the state medical examiner when the death appears to have (1) been caused by unknown or criminal means, during the commission of a crime, or by suicide, accident, or poisoning.

cure a permit from the Bureau of Vital Statistics, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. The statute does not differentiate between modern and ancient remains, skeletal and in-flesh remains, or whether the remains are complete or fragmentary. The state registrar interprets the statute to include human remains from archaeological sites, whether whole or fragmentary. The Alaska Administrative Code (7 AAC 05.540) that implements the statute states:

No body shall be disinterred for removal to another cemetery, or removed from a permanent vault for movement to another location, without a permit issued by the recording magistrate of the recording district within which the body is located, in accordance with the instructions of the State Registrar. All other health and transportation requirements shall be fulfilled. The State Registrar [Registrar of Vital Statistics] shall determine what necessary records must be kept of such movement, both at the place of disinterment and with the recorded and original certificates of death or fetal death, and he shall designate the form or forms to be used. Such permit shall be authority also for reinterment or other final disposition of such body and for transportation thereof. (7 AAC 05.540)

The state registrar issues two types of human remains permits: (1) disinterment-reinterment permits and (2) burial-transit permits. Disinterment-reinterment permits are required for any disinterment or reinterment of remains that have been previously buried, including those exposed by nature or in archaeological context (Sue Falkner, Bureau of Vital Statistics, 2005, personal telephone communication). Burial-transit permits are required for remains being buried (or cremated, or otherwise disposed of) for the first time. This permit is also required for the transport

of remains (including historic and archaeological remains) using a commercial transportation carrier.

Under previous operating procedures (i.e., the coroner system), the authority to issue permits was delegated to the district courts and varied somewhat according to jurisdiction and interpretation. Permits are now centralized with the registrar of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, which should be consulted regarding current operating procedures when archaeological or ancient remains are encountered. Although relocations of marked cemeteries and graves in urban areas are typically done by local funeral homes or their contractors operating under a state disinterment-reinterment permit, relocations of human remains can be accomplished by archaeologists or community members working under the appropriate permits.

STATE PROTOCOLS: 2004 MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

In October 2004, the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology (OHA), state medical examiner, and Alaska State Troopers completed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to provide consistency in state operating procedures when treating and reporting on human remains, particularly ancient remains. These procedures are summarized in the flow chart shown in Figure 1.

The state troopers, state medical examiner, and OHA all have statutory responsibilities related to graves and human remains. OHA is charged with compiling an inventory of historic, prehistoric, and archaeological resources in Alaska, including ancient graves and associated artifacts. To facilitate the protection of grave sites, the OHA has established a policy of assigning Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) numbers to grave sites regardless of age.

10 AS Title 18. Health, Safety, and Housing

AS Chapter 18.50. Vital Statistics Act

AS Section 18.50.250. Permits

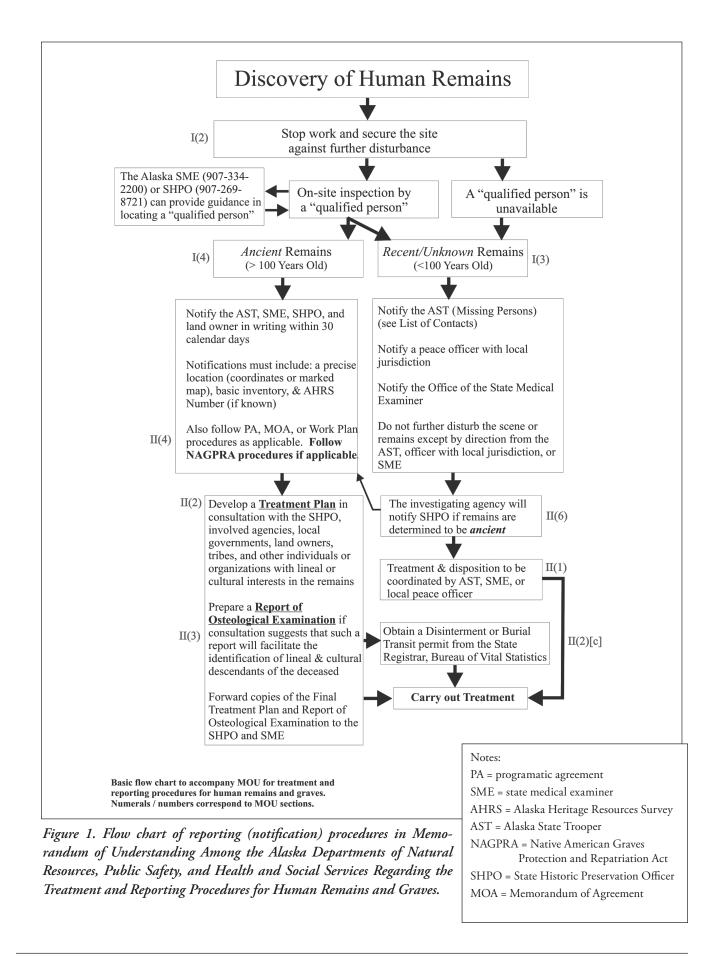
⁽a) The funeral director or person acting as the funeral director who first assumes custody of a dead body or fetus shall obtain a burial-transit permit before final disposition or removal from the state of the body or fetus and within 72 hours after death, except as otherwise authorized by regulation for special problem cases.

⁽b) The local registrar of the registration district where the death occurred shall issue a burial-transit permit when a certificate of death or fetal death has been filed in accordance with this chapter, except as otherwise authorized by regulation in special problem cases.

⁽c) A burial-transit permit that accompanies a dead body or fetus brought into the state is authority for final disposition of the body or fetus in the state.

⁽d) A permit for disinterment and reinterment is required before disinterment of a dead body or fetus except as authorized by regulation or otherwise provided by law. Upon proper application the permit shall be issued by the local registrar of vital statistics in accordance with instructions of the state registrar.

¹¹ The Bureau of Vital Statistics is a section of the Division of Public Health, within the Department of Health and Human Services. There are offices in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau.



The state medical examiner has statutory jurisdiction over death investigations in the state, with rare exceptions. The state troopers have jurisdiction over major crime investigations throughout the vast majority of the state. Since 1988, OHA has provided routine forensic consultation to the state troopers and state medical examiner through a reimbursable services agreement. OHA, the state medical examiner, and the state troopers jointly participate in a "cold case" working group to resolve questionable deaths and victim identities with assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other organizations with access to the advanced forensic technology.

The memorandum of understanding offers several potential benefits. Although each of the state agencies is charged with certain statutory responsibilities, the Alaska Statutes and the Alaska Administrative Code do not always provide clear and specific guidance for the reporting and treatment of remains determined to be ancient. The memorandum sets forth operating definitions, allows for consultation between agency officials and groups that may have an interest in the remains, and defines certain steps that agency officials should follow when ancient remains are reported. It also discusses permit requirements and allows the troopers, state medical examiner, and OHA to provide uniform guidance and counsel when contacted regarding human remains issues. The memorandum also requires that law enforcement officers notify the state historic preservation officer (SHPO) when investigating remains believed to be ancient. As an added benefit, the memorandum provides a general framework that can be adapted for use in cultural resource management agreements to ensure compliance with state laws and operating procedures.

To ensure that criminal activities do not go undetected, the memorandum assumes that human remains discovery sites are potential crime scenes and should not be disturbed until examined by a person with the appropriate level of expertise to make the required decision. This assumption that human remains discovery sites represent crime scenes until proven otherwise is based on legal protocols. The MOU allows that the "appropriate level of expertise" may vary according to the situation and does not always require forensic expertise. For example, a trained archaeologist with limited experience in the investigation of human remains should be able to assess whether the remains are modern or ancient based solely on context and

associations. However, if context and associations do not allow for a conclusive opinion by the field archaeologist, the remains should be examined by someone with training and experience in forensic anthropology (including both archaeology and forensic osteology). It is important that field and laboratory examinations be documented by notes, sketches, and photographs that allow for independent evaluations by the state medical examiner and other interested parties. The MOU also addresses consistency in the manner in which basic osteometric data sets are collected. For purposes of the MOU, ancient human remains are the remains of a person who died more than 100 years ago. Since the state medical examiner has the right to review all cases regardless of postmortem interval, 100 years is simply a practical guideline to facilitate MOU procedures. For much of Alaska, written documentation concerning missing persons, death certificates, etc. were not available until the turn of the 20th century.

The MOU is underlain by the premise that a respectful, nonintrusive examination of remains is important and necessary for (1) differentiating between ancient and recent remains, (2) establishing whether a criminal investigation is warranted, and (3) helping to identify lineal descendents and related ethnic groups. For example, a basic examination of the remains may reveal biological age, race or biological affiliation, sex, postmortem interval (time since death), trauma or disease, distinguishing characteristics, and other attributes that can help identify the deceased and determine the manner and cause of death. This information allows the police and medical examiner's staff to decide whether further investigation and/or disposition of the remains is needed. For ancient remains, such studies can also provide insights on aspects of the person's life that otherwise would be unknown (for example, nutrition, disease, genetics, migrations, ethnogenesis, longevity, cultural values, and environmental or task-related stress). More in-depth studies often produce comparative data sets that can help in a range of research applications that may ultimately benefit modern populations. For example, data specific to Alaska populations can help with more accurate identification of unknown deceased persons and may help modern medical personnel understand why some populations have higher rates of certain diseases. These type studies, which may require samples for DNA and other analyses, should be balanced

¹² The exceptions include military plane crashes and some federal lands. For some federal lands, joint jurisdictions have been established through federal-state agreements.

against the wishes of the lineal and cultural descendents of the deceased.

The MOU recommends reports of osteological examination when postmortem interval, race, and cultural affiliation cannot be determined on the basis of context and association (e.g., if the remains are not from a known archaeological site or a marked grave, as determined by a qualified person). For remains disturbed by a construction project or relocated to facilitate construction, the MOU places the financial burden of examination and relocation on the person or organization disturbing the remains.

Many ground-disturbing activities have the potential to disturb unreported burials. It is advisable to prepare a plan of action in advance of any archaeological or construction projects that could result in inadvertent discoveries of human remains, graves, or associations. These are now standard components of agreement documents associated with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (16 CFR 800). The plan should spell out procedures for complying with state and federal requirements, as well as how consultation will be conducted with appropriate tribes and other organizations that may have an interest in the discovered remains. The resolution of protocols in advance by consulting parties reduces the risk that a project could be stopped or delayed.

Key points of the MOU are: (1) treatment of all human remains with dignity and respect; (2) treatment of discovery sites as crime scenes until proven otherwise; (3) notification of the Alaska State Troopers, Bureau of Missing Persons, and local law enforcement jurisdictions; (4) notification of the state medical examiner, particularly for remains less than 100 years old; (5) notification of the state historic preservation officer when ancient or historic remains are discovered; (6) consultation with the state registrar regarding permits for the relocation and transport of human remains; (7) basic examination of the remains to ascertain postmortem interval and race; (8) more extensive examinations, when warranted by circumstances, to ascertain individualizing characteristics (i.e., sex, biological age, traumatic lesions, etc.); (9) consultation with tribal organizations, church organizations, community organizations, landowners, and individuals or organizations with lineal or cultural interests in the remains; (10) development of a treatment plan for the remains; and (11) compliance with NAGPRA and other federal laws when applicable. A copy of the MOU and attachments is available upon request from OHA.

PRACTICAL OPERATING PROCEDURES WHEN DEALING WITH ANCIENT HUMAN REMAINS IN ALASKA

The following protocols will ensure compliance with legal responsibilities and notification requirements in the event that human remains are discovered during project activities in Alaska.

- When planning ground-disturbing projects, including archaeological excavations, prepare a plan of action with specific guidance in the event that human remains are encountered. This is often specified in a section of an overall programmatic agreement or memorandum of agreement, but may be in a standalone document linked by reference to these. The plan should specify actions to be carried out in the event of human remains discoveries, as well as who is responsible for the actions. For example, "the project archaeologist shall make efforts to protect the grave, remains, and/or associated materials from further disturbance." The plan should be prepared in consultation with tribes, churches, landowners, local governments, and other organizations or individuals that may have an interest in human remains discoveries through lineal, cultural, or community ties. The plan should identify specific contacts and notification procedures, how the plan will ensure compliance with applicable state and federal laws, methods through which basic information will be collected and recorded, timelines and methods for any additional studies or sampling procedures, and details of final disposition of the remains.
- When human remains are discovered, stop activities that would further disturb the remains until legal requirements have been fulfilled. Treat all human remains with dignity and respect, be respectful to local customs, and avoid public display of the remains.
- Notify: (1) the Alaska Bureau of Investigation Missing Persons Bureau; (2) the law enforcement agency with local jurisdiction; (3) the state medical examiner, (4) the state historic preservation officer, if the remains are believed to be ancient; and (5) other parties identified in agreement documents. A list of current telephone numbers and e-mails is available upon request from OHA.
- Contact the state registrar, Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, regarding a permit if human remains (including archaeological remains) are to be removed, relocated, or transported.

- Unless otherwise instructed by the state medical examiner, Alaska Bureau of Investigation, or law enforcement investigator, conduct or sponsor a basic assessment of the remains, along with their associations and context, to determine time since death, race, and cultural affiliation. Forward this information to the state medical examiner, state historic preservation officer, and others identified in planning documents.
- Initiate NAGPRA consultation if the remains are determined to be Native American and the remains are from federal, federally restricted, or federal trust lands (Native allotments or town site lots). Note that compliance with state laws is also required.
- Conduct consultation with tribes and other interested organizations or individuals who may have an interest in the remains and their final disposition. Follow any identified procedures set forth during project planning.

REFERENCES

Alaska Departments of Natural Resources, Public Safety, and Health and Social Services

2004 Memorandum of Understanding Among the Alaska Departments of Natural Resources, Public Safety, and Health and Social Services Regarding the Treatment and Reporting Procedures for Human Remains and Graves. On file, Office of History and Archaeology, State of Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, Department of Natural Resources, Anchorage.

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