

DELAWARE RESIDENTS' OPINIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE 2014 SURVEY

SUMMARY BY DELAWARE COASTAL PROGRAMS



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DELAWARE COASTAL PROGRAMS

The mission of the Delaware Coastal Programs Section is to preserve, protect, develop, and enhance the resources of our state's coastal zone through effective administration of the Delaware Coastal Management Program and the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve. The Delaware Coastal Management Program (DCMP) is designed to protect, develop, and where possible, enhance the coastal resources of the state.

The Delaware Coastal Management Program provides assistance to state and local governments for local land use planning, manages coastal resources through innovative research projects, grant programs, and policy development, including special areas management planning. The DCMP also administers the Coastal Zone Federal Consistency Certification program and offers other special on-the-ground projects related to Delaware's coastal resources.

The Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve (DNERR), designated in 1993, is one of 28 National Estuarine Research Reserves across the country. Its mission is to preserve and manage the natural resources within the Reserve as a place for research, to provide education and outreach programs that promote better understanding of Delaware's estuarine and coastal areas, and to promote informed coastal decision-making.

Delaware Coastal Programs

89 Kings Highway

Dover, DE 19901

302.739.9283 voice

302.739.2048 fax

<http://de.gov/coastal>

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes, perceptions and knowledge about climate change and sea level rise are rapidly evolving. Climate change stories are in the headlines almost daily, politicians are increasingly discussing the need to act and weather events like Hurricane Sandy have brought the potential impacts of climate change home to many on the East Coast. Given this changing landscape, it is important for decision-makers, educators and others to have locally based and up-to-date information about public attitudes and perceptions about climate change so that plans, projects and outreach materials can be specific and tailored for Delaware.

Recognizing the need to understand the public's attitudes about climate change, the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control's (DNREC) Delaware Coastal Programs contracted with Responsive Management, Inc. in 2009 to conduct a baseline survey and analysis. This baseline survey was conducted using phone interviews of 1,505 Delaware residents and asked a series of questions to test the respondents' general knowledge of climate change and sea level rise, general knowledge of potential impacts and support for action. The results of the 2009 survey have been used by DNREC and its partners to inform outreach and messaging strategies and to inform policy development. The survey is available online: <http://de.gov/climateslrsurvey>.

Since 2009, the DNREC Delaware Coastal Programs, DNREC Division of Climate and Energy, and the Delaware Sea Grant College Program, and numerous partners have focused significant effort and resources to develop climate change and sea level rise policies in the state and to increase awareness of the importance of proactively preparing for the impacts of climate change and sea level rise. At the time of the 2009 survey, the DNREC Delaware Programs envisioned repeating the survey in five years to determine how public perceptions on the climate change and sea level rise were evolving.

The 2014 *Delaware Residents' Opinions of Climate Change and Sea Level Rise* survey was conducted by Responsive Management, Inc. with funding and technical assistance from the DNREC Delaware Coastal Programs, DNREC Division of Energy and Climate and Delaware Sea Grant. The 2014 survey utilized the same methodology as the 2009 survey and was based upon the same set of questions. Funding limitations and increased understanding of public perceptions of climate change resulted in the elimination, addition and modification of several questions; however the majority of questions asked in the 2014 survey were identical to the 2009 survey. 1,508 residents were surveyed by telephone (cell phones were included); a sample size representative enough to allow results to be reported at a 95% confidence interval.

This summary of the 2014 *Delaware Residents' Opinions of Climate Change and Sea Level Rise* highlights the methods and major findings of the 2014 survey. Overall, the 2014 survey indicates that Delaware residents have become slightly more supportive of, or agreeable to, the concepts and actions related to climate change and sea level rise. Survey respondents in 2014 were also slightly more likely to consider climate change and sea level rise threats, but concern for both did not increase substantially.

The 2014 survey showed that there remains strong agreement that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts of climate change and sea level rise. It is also worth noting that many of the increases and decreases that were seen in the comparisons between the 2009 and 2014 surveys show shifts into response categories of "strongly" or "very" which may be an indication that in the past five years, those who were only marginally convinced or concerned about climate change and sea level rise have become increasingly concerned. There were also some small, yet encouraging, decreases in responses that suggest denial or misunderstanding of climate change and sea level rise.

METHODOLOGY

The 2014 survey of Delaware residents' opinions on climate change and sea level rise entailed a telephone survey of 1,508 Delaware residents. Both landlines and cellphones were included. The telephone survey questionnaire was developed cooperatively by Responsive Management, Inc., DNREC Delaware Coastal Programs, DNREC Division of Climate and Energy, and Delaware Sea Grant and was based on a similar survey administered for Delaware Coastal Programs in 2009. Responsive Management, Inc. conducted pre-tests of the questionnaire to ensure proper wording, flow, and logic of the survey questions. The sample was stratified in two ways: by county, with a goal of 500 completed interviews per county, and by cell phone/landline, with these being sampled proportionally in each county. The survey results were weighted by demographic and geographic characteristics in each county and then by county population, providing statewide results representative of all Delaware residents. Cross-tabulations were run on many questions by county of residence and by coastal/non-coastal residency. Additionally, trends based on the 2009 survey are included for those questions where a statistically significant change was identified. The findings of the survey are reported at a 95% confidence interval. The sums of the values may not be exact due to rounding errors.

2014 SURVEY RESULTS

PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

To test whether climate change and sea level rise rank as concerns for Delaware residents, the survey presented a list of seven areas of possible concern and asked residents to indicate if they were very concerned, somewhat concerned, or not at all concerned about each. While a majority of residents are very concerned about the economy (72%), public education (69%), health care (67%), crime rates (62%), and the environment (60%), less than a majority are very concerned about climate change (41%) and sea level rise (25%).

Similar to the above question, the survey presented a list of nine possible environmental concerns and asked residents to rate their concern (very, somewhat, or not at all). Again, climate change and sea level rise are low on the ranking. A majority of residents are very concerned about water pollution (71%), toxic waste (68%), air quality (61%), loss of forest habitat (54%), and declining fish and wildlife populations (52%). This compares to 43% being very concerned about climate change and 36% being very concerned about sea level rise.

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

Two questions asked residents to rate their knowledge about climate change and sea level rise, and they claimed to know a bit more about climate change than sea level rise. Most Delaware residents say that they know at least a moderate amount about climate change. 62% say that they know either a great deal (14%) or a moderate amount (48%). At the other end, 32% claim to know a little, and only 5% say that they know nothing. In looking at knowledge of sea level rise, 41% of residents say that they know a great deal or moderate amount.

OPINION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE AND WHETHER THEY ARE HAPPENING

The survey directly asked residents their opinions about whether climate change and sea level rise are happening. Regarding climate change, 79% are completely or mostly convinced that it is happening; however, a substantial portion of that consists of residents who are only mostly convinced (46% are completely and 32% are mostly convinced). At the other end, 20% of Delaware residents say that they are not so convinced or not at all convinced that climate change is happening.

Likewise, 70% of residents are completely or mostly convinced that sea levels are rising, the latter split between completely convinced (39%) and mostly convinced (31%). 26% are not so convinced or not at all convinced.

- The survey included another way to assess opinion on whether climate change is happening. The survey asked residents if they agree or disagree that “Scientists are right that climate change is occurring”: while the majority of residents agree (83%), a substantial percentage (11%) disagree.
- Another question asked residents to say, regardless of their personal views, whether or not most scientists think climate change is happening. 31% say that there is a lot of disagreement among scientists about whether it is happening or not, and another 3% say that most scientists think climate change is not happening. Only 49% of residents say that most scientists think that climate change is happening.
- A follow-up question asked residents to say whether climate change, if it is indeed happening, is caused mostly by human activities, mostly by natural changes in the environment, or both about equally. Most commonly, residents say it is caused mostly by human activities (41%), while 24% say mostly natural causes, and 29% say both about equally.

Another question asked if residents agree or disagree that “Climate change is contributing to the rise in sea levels.” The majority (79%) agree, but 11% disagree that climate change is a contributing factor.

The survey delved into personal experiences with climate change and sea level rise, asking residents if they agree or disagree that they have personally experienced the impacts of climate change and sea level rise.

- A slight majority agree that they have “personally experienced or observed local impacts of climate change” (53%), but 40% disagree.
- Just over a quarter agree that they have “personally experienced the impacts of sea level rise” (28%), but the majority disagree (66%).

PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE AS A THREAT

About four-fifths of Delaware residents (79%) say that climate change is a threat. However about a fifth of Delaware residents (19%) are complacent about climate change, saying that climate change as a threat is not very serious or not at all serious. At the other end of the scale, 34% say it is a somewhat serious threat, and 45% say it is a very serious threat.

About two-thirds of Delaware residents (68%) are worried about sea level rise. 31% of residents are not at all worried about sea level rise. Moving up the scale, 24% are only a little worried, 31% are worried a moderate amount, and 13% are worried a great deal.

The survey presented ten items and asked respondents to rate how much of a threat climate change was to each. The items fall into four tiers:

- The top tier consists of people's health and Delaware's agriculture: 45% and 44%, respectively, say that climate change is a very serious threat to the items.
- The next tier consists of people's safety and the natural resources of Delaware: 38% and 34% say it is a very serious threat to them.
- The third tier is made up of Delaware's economy, Delaware's infrastructure, and outdoor recreation in Delaware: 30%, 29%, and 28%, respectively, say climate change is a very serious threat to these.
- The bottom tier consists of national security, the local community, and people's homes: less than 25% think climate change is a very serious threat to these.

Similar to the above series, another series presented 15 items to residents and asked them to say how much of a threat sea level rise is to each. In looking at the percentages who think that sea level rise is a very serious threat, three tiers emerge:

- Two items are at the top substantially ahead of the rest of the items: Delaware's beaches and ocean-front cities and towns in Delaware. On these, 57% and 56%, respectively, think sea level rise is a very serious threat.
- A middle tier consists of 9 of the 15 items, with a quarter to just under half saying sea level rise is a very serious threat: these include marsh and wetlands areas and riverfront cities and towns in Delaware, as well as Delaware's public works systems, its wildlife populations, its economy, and outdoor recreation in Delaware.
- The bottom tier is people's local community, themselves, their property, and their families. Each of these has less than 25% saying that sea level rise is a very serious threat to it.

Two questions examined perceptions of the timing of climate change and sea level rise.

- Residents were asked when they think climate change will have an impact on their area. The most common response is that it is having impacts now (41% give this response). Another 33% give a time of 25 years or less. However, 18% consist of those saying 50 or 100 years or saying never (i.e., climate change is not happening).
- Regarding sea level rise, 20% say now, 40% give a time of 25 years or less, and 29% saying 50 or 100 years or never.

PERCEPTIONS OF EFFICACY OF TAKING ACTION TO MITIGATE CLIMATE CHANGE

A majority of Delaware residents (72%) agree that the impacts of climate change can be reduced by human efforts; on the other hand, 21% disagree. Likewise, 59% agree that sea level rise can be reduced by human efforts, while 29% disagree.

- Similarly, 65% agree that they can personally take actions that will help reduce climate change; meanwhile, 28% disagree.
- Two questions delved into the amount of action that can be taken to reduce climate change, both asking about agreement or disagreement with statements. The first statement says that "There is limited action

that can be taken to reduce climate change,” and the second statement says that “There are many actions that can be taken to reduce climate change.” A greater percentage agree that there are many actions that can be taken than agree that there is limited action that can be taken.

- For limited action, 49% of residents agree that there is limited action that can be taken to reduce climate change. However, 42% disagree with this statement.
- For many actions, 70% of residents agree that there are many actions that can be taken to reduce climate change, while only 19% disagree.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES PERTAINING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Two questions looked at whether action should be taken now to combat climate change or whether more studies should be done. Regardless of their opinions on climate change and sea level rise, the large majority of residents say that action should be taken to address or reduce the impacts of sea level rise in their area before impacts occur (74% say this) rather than as impacts begin (8%) or after impacts cause problems (3%). Note that 8% said never because sea levels are not rising.

Two questions looked at whether action should be taken now or whether more study should be done.

- A large majority of Delaware residents (76%) agree that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts of climate change; on the other hand, 18% disagree.
 - This compares to 63% who agree that we should conduct more research before taking any action to address climate change and 32% who disagree.
- A similar pairing of questions asked the same thing about sea level rise. A large majority of Delaware residents (72%) agree that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts of sea level rise, while 21% disagree. Meanwhile, 64% agree that we should conduct more research before taking any action to address sea level rise, and 30% disagree.

A large majority of residents (74%) agree that the state of Delaware needs to conduct more research to identify the impacts of sea level rise in the state; 18% disagree.

The survey presented ten actions that could be taken to address sea level rise in Delaware. For each action, residents were asked if they would support or oppose it.

- Two actions are in a top tier: change building codes and regulations to reduce risk in flood prone areas and avoid building new structures in areas at risk from sea level rise: 85% and 77%, respectively, strongly or moderately support those actions.
- The next tier consists of those actions with well more than half of Delaware residents in strong or moderate support: increasing funding for research (72%); elevating buildings in areas of risk using private funding (71%); allowing beaches and wetlands to naturally migrate inland (64%); building dikes, seawalls, and bulkheads to keep water back (65%); and elevating the land surface in areas of risk (63%).
- The bottom tier are those that explicitly entail using government funds: elevating buildings in areas at risk from sea level rise using government funds (52%), purchasing or acquiring land and open space at risk from sea level rise from willing land sellers using government funds (46%), and purchasing or buying out frequently flooded properties using government funds (42%).

The large majority of Delaware residents (70%) support having their local and state governments spend more money on public construction projects if it means that the structures could withstand or accommodate sea level rise; however, 20% oppose.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR TAKING ACTION

The survey presented five different entities (the federal government, state government, local government, business and industry, and Delaware residents) and asked whether each should be doing more to address or reduce the impacts of sea level rise in Delaware. In looking at the percentages of residents who say that the entities should be doing much more, there is little separation between the top four entities: business and industry (43% say that they should do much more), the federal government (41%), the state government (40%), and the local/county government (38%). At the bottom are Delaware's residents (34% of residents say that Delaware's residents should be doing much more).

PERSONAL ACTIONS TAKEN RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

About 2 in 5 Delaware residents (41% of them) say that they have personally taken action within the past 2 years to try to reduce climate change. About 30% of residents do not believe that personal actions can help mitigate the impacts of climate change. The survey then presented six things that people could have done pertaining to addressing sea level rise or learning more about sea level rise. The majority of residents have read a newspaper or magazine article about sea level rise (53%), and nearly half have had a conversation with a friend or family member about sea level rise (45%). Lesser percentages have read about sea level rise on social media (29%), have visited a website for sea level rise information (24%), have read a brochure or handout about sea level rise (17%), or have attended a public meeting or workshop about sea level rise (7%).

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

The most popular sources of information about environmental issues in Delaware are television (47% get environmental information this way), newspapers (44%), and the Internet (42%). No other source was named by more than 15% of residents. Overwhelmingly, Delawareans are not accessing state and not-for-profit organizations for their environmental information. Only 8% reported that they get most of their environmental information from the DNREC website, 5% from their social media sites and less than 5% from publications and brochures.

In 2009, 10% of respondents indicated that they would be very likely to attend a meeting or webinar about sea level rise; in 2014 7% of respondents had actually attended a public meeting or workshop on sea level rise. Only a quarter of Delaware residents (25%) have not had any participation or outreach concerning sea level rise (have not had a conversation, read an article, read about it on the internet, read a brochure, or attended a public meeting about sea level rise).

The topics about climate change and sea level rise most in demand include the impacts of climate change and sea level rise, the impacts specifically on the Delaware Bay and the state's beaches, actions that can be taken to

mitigate climate change and sea level rise, impacts on specific resources or groups, how to protect property, how climate change and sea level rise correlate, and funding needs to address the impacts.

Residents are split on whether there is enough available information about sea level rise: 46% agree that there is, but 44% disagree.

COMPARISON OF THE 2009 AND 2014 SURVEYS

Response Management compared the results of the 2014 survey with the results of a similar survey of Delaware residents they conducted in 2009. Many of the same questions were asked each time, and in general, the changes between the two surveys show that fluctuations in responses from 2009 to 2014 were not dramatic and often only slight, even when statistically significant. Overall, it seems that since 2009, Delaware residents have become slightly more supportive of or agreeable to the concept of and actions related to climate change and, to a lesser degree, sea level rise. Residents may be slightly more likely to consider them threats, but concern for both has not increased substantially. Self-reported knowledge levels about climate change and sea level rise have also not experienced increases, even though there is strong agreement that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts related to each showed increases. It is worth noting that many of the increases and decreases that were seen in the trends analysis are in the extreme categories, such the responses that are qualified with strongly or very, suggesting the changes in attitudes could be more a shift in degree, that is, perhaps some who were previously only slightly or moderately of an opinion have now progressed to a more solidified or stronger opinion. Nonetheless, there are also some small yet encouraging decreases in responses that suggest a denial or misinformed stance on climate change and sea level rise.

Unless noted, each of the response changes between the 2009 and 2014 surveys listed below are statistically significant, meaning the correlation would happen by chance only 1 out of 100 times or $p \leq 0.01$ (in some cases where noted 5 out of 100 times or $p \leq 0.05$).

PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The comparison of the 2009 and 2014 survey shows that the percentage of Delaware residents who are very concerned about sea level rise decreased from 30% in 2009 to 25% in 2014.

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

The comparison of the 2009 and 2014 survey shows that self-professed knowledge levels regarding climate change dropped slightly from 2009 to 2014: 70% reported knowing at least a moderate amount about climate change in 2009 compared to 62% in 2014, while the percentage reporting they know a little increased from 25% to 32%. The self-reported knowledge levels regarding sea level rise are about the same as they were in 2009.

OPINION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE AND WHETHER THEY ARE HAPPENING

Although the percentage of Delaware residents who are completely convinced that sea levels are rising remains lower than the percentage who are completely convinced that climate change is happening, there was a substantial increase in the percentage who are completely convinced that sea levels are rising from 2009 to 2014:

29% in 2009 compared to 39% in 2014. The increases were in the percentage of those who are completely convinced as well as the overall percentage of those who are completely or mostly convinced (from 63% to 70% combined).

Another question asked residents to say, regardless of their personal views, whether or not most scientists think climate change is happening (the overwhelming majority of climate scientists think climate change is happening). While there is not a statistically significant increase in the percentage who say most scientists think climate change is happening, there was a statistically significant decrease among those who say there is a lot of disagreement and a statistically significant increase among those who say they don't know enough to say.

In the trends analysis, the percentage of those who agree (strongly or moderately combined) that they have personally experienced the impacts of sea level rise increased substantially from 22% in 2009 to 30% in 2014.

PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE AS A THREAT

The change in responses between the 2009 and the 2014 surveys shows a substantial increase in the percentage of those who say climate change is a very serious threat, increasing from 38% in 2009 to 45% in 2014. The percentage of those who think climate change is a somewhat serious threat decreased, while opinions that climate change is not very or not at all serious and "don't know" responses remained relatively stable, suggesting that perhaps those who already thought climate change was a somewhat serious threat now progressed to believing it is a very serious threat.

The percentages of residents who worry about sea level rise a great deal and a moderate amount both increased slightly, resulting in a combined increase from 39% who were worried a great deal or a moderate amount in 2009 to 44% in 2014 ($p \leq 0.05$).

The percentages of residents who think sea level rise is a very serious threat increased the most for river-front cities and towns in Delaware (from 34% in 2009 to 43% in 2014), the State of Delaware (from 33% to 42%), the mid- Atlantic U.S. (from 30% to 38%), ocean-front cities and towns in Delaware (from 48% to 56%), and outdoor recreation in Delaware (from 24% to 29%). The percentages of residents who think sea level rise is a very serious threat also increased slightly for nearly every other item on the list except for Delaware's economy and residents themselves.

The percentage of residents who say sea level rise is having impacts now in the area where they live increased from 14% in 2009 to 20% in 2014.

PERCEPTIONS OF EFFICACY OF TAKING ACTION TO MITIGATE CLIMATE CHANGE & PERSONAL ACTIONS TAKEN RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

A majority of Delaware residents agree that the impacts of climate change can be reduced by human efforts and the trends analysis shows a slight increase in the percentage of those who strongly disagree (from 11% in 2009 to 15% in 2014).

There is a decrease in the percentage of residents who disagree (moderately or strongly) that there is limited action that can be taken to reduce climate change (from 47% in 2009 to 42% in 2014) ($p \leq 0.05$). For the statement about many actions can be taken, agreement and disagreement remained relatively stable from 2009 to 2014.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES PERTAINING TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND SENSE OF URGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR TAKING ACTION

There was a small decrease in the percentage of residents who say that action should be taken to address or reduce the impacts of sea level rise in their area before impacts occur (from 80% in 2009 to 74% in 2014) and a small increase in the percentage who say never because sea levels are not rising (from 4% to 8%).

Although there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of residents who strongly agree that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts of climate change (54% of Delaware residents today strongly agree that immediate action should be taken compared to 35% in 2009) the increase should be considered with caution due to a change in question wording from 2009 to 2014. In 2009 the statement respondents were asked to agree or disagree with was, "We should take immediate and drastic action to reduce the impacts of climate change." In 2014, the phrase "and drastic" was deleted.

A similar yet slightly less dramatic increase occurred for the statement that we should take immediate action to reduce the impacts of sea level rise, with 35% strongly agreeing in 2009 compared to 49% in 2014. There was also an increase in the disagree response for the statement that we should conduct more research before taking any action to address sea level rise, and the increase in disagreement for this statement occurred only in the strongly disagree category (from 15% to 22%). The percentage of residents who strongly agree that the state of Delaware needs to conduct more research to identify the impacts of sea level rise in Delaware increased to a slight majority (from 45% in 2009 to 52% in 2014), and overall disagreement (strongly and moderately) decreased ($p \leq 0.05$).

Two management actions showed substantial increases in overall support, with corresponding decreases in overall opposition: elevating buildings in areas at risk from sea level rise using government funds (the percentage of residents who support this action increased from 39% in 2009 to 52% in 2014) and elevating the land surface in areas at risk (from 54% to 63%). For each of these the increase occurred either entirely or mostly in the strongly support category, but the increases in overall support are both statistically significant.

The percentage of residents who strongly support allowing beaches and wetlands to naturally migrate inland increased from 29% to 41%. For the remaining actions, overall support and opposition remained relatively stable from 2009 to 2014.

Overall support for having local and state governments spend more money on public construction projects if it means the structures can withstand or accommodate sea level rise increased slightly from 2009 to 2014, and overall opposition decreased slightly. The most substantial change was an increase in the percentage of residents who strongly support the action, going from 34% in 2009 to 46% in 2014.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND SEA LEVEL RISE

The trends analysis shows a slight increase in the percentage of residents who agree that there is enough available information about sea level rise (from 39% in 2009 to 46% in 2014), with most of that increase occurring in the strongly agree category (from 22% to 28%).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The entire 2014 Delaware Residents' Opinions on Climate Change and Sea Level Rise document, as well as other resources on the survey are available on the Delaware Coastal Programs and Delaware Sea Grant websites:

<http://de.gov/climateslrsurvey>

<http://www.deseagrant.org>

For more information, please contact:

Kelly Valencik or Susan Love

DNREC Delaware Coastal Programs

(302) 739-9283

Kelly.Valencik@state.de.us

Susan.Love@state.de.us