Health Care: Health-care costs nationwide are high and rising, but in Alaska those costs are far above the U.S. average. Also, most primary-care doctors in urban areas no longer accept Medicare payments, which they say aren’t adequate. Important questions include what makes care in Alaska so much more expensive, what changes will the Affordable Care Act bring, and how can the state’s growing number of older residents get better access to primary care?

Transportation: Alaska needs a lot of energy to keep it running, and it relies much more on air and water transportation than the Lower 48 states do. It’s especially vulnerable to rising fuel prices, which make transportation more expensive and add to the costs of producing everything from fish fillets to gasoline. ISER researchers have been analyzing how higher fuel prices add to the costs of transportation and ultimately work their way through the economy.

Oil: Two-thirds of the economic growth in Alaska since it became a state can be traced to oil from giant, low-cost fields the state government owns on the North Slope. That oil has made possible low taxes, generous public spending, and annual cash payments to all Alaskans. But now, 80% of the oil from those fields is gone, and Alaska faces big choices about how to keep the economy and government healthy in the future. How can the state best use its remaining assets—including roughly $60 billion in savings and reserves, large deposits of natural gas, and additional but harder-to-get oil? And what oil tax regime would provide the right balance between earning revenues for the state and attracting new investment in oil exploration and production?

Seafood: Alaska’s diverse fisheries account for more than half of U.S. seafood catches, and Alaska fisheries management is generally considered a model for sustainability. Still, the fisheries face major challenges. How can residents of coastal communities and other Alaskans maintain their shares of the harvest? How can Alaska’s industry respond to rapid changes in the global industry, driven by growth in aquaculture and other factors? How can allocation conflicts between commercial, subsistence, and sport fishermen be resolved?

Energy: Alaska has historically had among the highest energy prices in the nation, and the recent high price of oil has made the problem worse—especially in the many small, remote places that rely on fuel oil to generate electricity and heat. How can Alaskans use less fossil fuel and cut their energy costs? ISER researchers are studying the effectiveness of state programs that help households pay to make their homes more energy-efficient, and of various efforts to increase the use of wind, water, and other renewable energy sources.

Education: The Center for Alaska Education Policy Research (CAEPR) was established within ISER in 2011, to study the state’s education issues at all levels, from pre-school through college. Dozens of small, remote schools face special challenges—including how to reduce the high turnover among teachers, and how to offer the range of courses students need to succeed in college.

Kids Count: Since 1996 ISER has been home to the Kids Count Alaska program, one of 50 such programs the Annie E. Casey Foundation sponsors across the country. Every year Kids Count Alaska reports to policymakers and the public on the health, safety, education, and economic well-being of Alaska’s children.
Institute of Social and Economic Research  •  November 2013

Researchers at the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) have analyzed social and economic trends and events in Alaska for more than 50 years. The state legislature established ISER in 1961, soon after Alaska became a state. It was Alaska’s first public policy research organization, intended to study the population and economy of the new state and to help policymakers and Alaskans in general better understand and deal with change. ISER is part of the College of Business and Public Policy at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Gunnar Knapp, Director

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ISER’s main website: Find publications, announcements, staff profiles, and more.

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More About ISER

ISER’s annual budget averages $3 million to $4 million, and in a typical year ISER generates about three-quarters of its funding in contracts and grants from public agencies and private businesses and foundations. The rest is from the University of Alaska Anchorage’s general funds, which support some research but also teaching and public service.

The size of the ISER staff varies, depending on how many and what kinds of projects are underway, but its core staff is about 35, including faculty members, research professionals, and support staff. ISER also frequently works jointly with other organizations, including UA departments, universities in other states or countries, school districts, and non-profit groups.

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About the ISER artwork: The cover illustration is of Mt. Susitna, across Knik Arm from Anchorage, known locally as “Sleeping Lady.”