

# Seward Poised to Seize Record of Enduring Alaska's Rainiest Day

[Mike Campbell](#)  
October 10, 2014



Large rainstorms have pummeled Seward in recent years -- including 2012 storm that caused severe flooding shown in this file photo. But the community's record is the 15.05 inches that fell in 24 hours in 1986, which may soon officially become the new state record. *Marc Lester / ADN*

Seward may be on the brink of seizing some soggy notoriety as the Alaska locale that endured the wettest day in state history.

For the past 32 years, that distinction has belonged to Angoon, a town of 450 on Admiralty Island in Southeast Alaska, which, according to National Weather Service records, received 15.2 inches of rain in 24 hours on Oct. 12, 1982. That's nearly as much precipitation as the 16.6 inches that Anchorage gets in a typical year, including snowfall.

Several years ago, Brian Brettschneider, an Anchorage-based environmental planner and climatologist, began questioning the record when the company he worked for got involved in drafting an Environmental Impact Statement for a proposed airport in Angoon. His research uncovered a couple of oddities about the precipitation record.

- Angoon's average annual precipitation was about 35 inches. Could nearly half of it fall on a single day? That rarely happens anywhere except in parched desert areas.
- For all of 1982, Angoon totaled more than 200 inches, or nearly six times its average.

"Clearly something was amiss," Brettschneider wrote. "But what was it?"

The man who actually recorded Angoon's precipitation in 1982 was now living in Ketchikan and willing to talk to Brettschneider, although he requested anonymity.

"What kind of luck is that?" Brettschneider asked. "It turns out that the (previous) longtime observer in Angoon had passed away (in 1981) and the gentleman now in Ketchikan continued the observations to preserve the data continuity. Unfortunately, before he was able to be trained by the NWS staff in Juneau, he collected several months of precipitation data using an incorrect measurement technique -- which magnified all precipitation readings by a factor of 10. In hindsight, the 15.2 inches should have been 1.52 inches."

About the same time Brettschneider was researching Angoon rainfall, Carl Trypaluk with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency of the National Weather Service, noted the Angoon oddity in the middle of another project and sent his findings to the weather service in Juneau. Before long, he and Brettschneider teamed up.

The State Climate Extremes Committee, an ad hoc group that evaluates climate records of individual states, unanimously recommended this year that the Angoon record be removed, and an article in the August issue of the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society affirmed the move. Now the director of the National Climate Data Center must bless that decision.

"At this point," said Rick Thoman, the climate sciences and services manager of the National Weather Service in Fairbanks and a member of the state climate committee, "it's pretty pro forma. That observation has long been suspect for being far outside the norm. By Southeast standards, Angoon is not a terribly wet place. There was very little discussion by the committee, really.

"It was an excellent piece of climate detective work."

Once Angoon is officially bumped, the No. 2 site is expected to grab the title. That would be soggy Seward. The Kenai Peninsula town of about 2,700 residents endured 15.05 inches of rain on Oct. 10, 1986, during a deluge that battered Southcentral Alaska, causing \$20 million damage and a federal disaster declaration. "Broad areas along the Resurrection River and Salmon Creek at the head of Resurrection Bay were inundated"

by the severe storm, according to a U.S. Geological Survey report that labeled the rainfall a once-a-century event.

So is being elevated to No. 1 a matter of local pride? Or remorse?

"Wow," said Cindy Clock, executive director of the Seward Chamber of Commerce. "Is that a distinction the Seward Chamber really wants to promote? I guess a little infamy won't hurt us.

"I can only hope October 2014 won't be a repeat of '86 -- or even close."

Clock's colleague Dorothy Osenga, director of membership services for the Seward Chamber and a lifelong resident, worries a bit. "(Floods) seem to be coming more frequently. We used to call the big deluges 100-year floods, but it seems like we've had quite a few of them."

Typically, the worst ones happen in late fall, when most tourists who come to fish, tour Resurrection Bay or climb the famous Mount Marathon have left for the year. No doubt the sun will be out by next May.

Contact Mike Campbell at [mcampbell@adn.com](mailto:mcampbell@adn.com).