

# Alaska Wing eases plight of Yup'ik Eskimos struggling with winter food shortages

In Hooper Bay, helpers of all ages turned out to assist with moving food from the CAP aircraft onto sleds and into the community.



Photo by Maj. Mike Coffing, Alaska Wing

By Kristi Carr

Imagine paying \$1,500 each month to heat your modest home. Then imagine going to a grocery store — one you may need to travel to without benefit of roads and at a considerable distance — and requiring \$50 in fuel for the round trip by snowmobile. Once there, you find the shelves alarmingly bare and prices like \$18 for a can of Crisco and \$10 for a gallon of milk apt to go bad the next day.

If you can relate, you are most likely a resident of western Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and Bering Sea coast, where 85 percent of the population is native Alaskan, Yup'ik Eskimo, and where average incomes fall well below the federal poverty level. So, what do you do — freeze or starve?

This is a stark problem that has been festering for some time. But now with the rest of the country feeling the economic pinch, the plight of this remote area — where 20,000 inhabitants are spread out over a land mass the size of Oregon — is beginning to get the attention it demands, and Civil Air Patrol is part of the response.

## *It takes a village ... and some airplanes*

Many Alaskan agencies, organizations and businesses have become involved in addressing the food shortage by collecting food donations and moving them to intermediate stops, most notably Bethel, population about 6,000 — the largest town in the Delta.

But what still was needed was delivery to outlying villages, where populations range roughly from 80 to 1,400 apiece. With most of the Delta's terrain undeveloped tundra, these villages are most easily accessed by air — CAP's specialty.

## *Making it happen*

For this mission, the Alaska Wing moved two additional aircraft and aircrews to Bethel to assist Bethel Composite Squadron. CAP flew 24 sorties in support of the program.

Much of the donated food was gathered through the Food Bank of Alaska in Anchorage, and other



Photo by Capt. Udo Cassee, Alaska Wing

contributions came from Fairbanks Community Food Bank, Safeway, Wal-Mart and faith-based community organizations in Fairbanks and Anchorage. In addition to CAP, transportation was provided by Alaska Airlines and Lynden Transportation.

“We humble food bank folks here understand and appreciate the awesome job CAP did in flying all this in,” said Reg Buchanan, food resources manager for the Food Bank of Alaska.

## *Dinner is served*

CAP’s food delivery flights began in March with delivery of 2,000 pounds of frozen food. Subsequent delivery totals reached up to 13,000 pounds every couple of weeks.

Food pallets were divided into “dry” and “chill” categories before shipment to intermediate hubs. The “chill” pallets, stacked with cheese, boxed fresh milk and cased eggs, were safe to store in a cool corner of a hangar when temperatures were cold outside. There were fresh vegetables, such as potatoes and onions, though the majority of the items consisted of dry goods, such as flour, rice, salt, sugar, crackers, bread, canned vegetables and fruits and canned meats.

Nunam Iqua resident Ann Strongheart, left, helps Capt. Udo Cassee load a sled with food for transport into the village.

## *On a personal level*

It’s hard to contemplate thousands of pounds of food. But consider a can of formula for a baby who’s had none for the last week. Or imagine the smells and tastes of a frozen pizza for a family who went hungry the night before.

Maj. Mike Coffing, who has spent 23 of his 31 years as a state resident — 18 of them in the Delta region — researching and documenting the cash-subsistence economy of rural Alaska, noted, “Our combined efforts are making a difference in the lives of the people in western Alaska. Wild fish, game, plants and berries are still what the Yup’ik prefer, and those foods are healthier than much of the farm-raised and processed food most of us are accustomed to having. The Western-style foods we deliver will never replace wild salmon, whitefish, moose, caribou, seals, ducks and geese, but they will help ensure that some needy families get help to make it through these late winter months.”

Background: Icy taxi areas and blowing snow at Bethel Airport delay Civil Air Patrol’s food delivery mission.

Photo by Maj. Mike Coffing, Alaska Wing

## *An increasing struggle*

Some scientists think the entire region is undergoing an ecological metamorphosis due to changes in the climate. The North Pacific Research Board and the National Science Foundation are in the middle of a joint \$52 million study of the eastern Bering Sea ecosystem that began in 2007 and is scheduled to end in 2012. Close to 100 scientists from federal, state, university and private institutions are studying numerous ways a changing ecosystem could affect the Bering Sea area, from atmospheric forcing and physical oceanography to humans and communities, including economic and social implications.

This year, the commercial salmon harvest was down, limiting cash income many families depend on to purchase basic necessities. Dana Strommen, a member of State Rep. Jay Ramras's staff, cites the poor fishing season coupled with high fuel costs as the main reasons for the hunger crisis. At the same time, a brutal winter has taken its toll on land game populations, leaving less to hunt. In addition, state and federal hunting and fishing laws limit the season and set harvest limits on some species.

## *An important consideration*

In addition to the pressing need to supplement food obtained through the Delta's typical lifestyle of hunting, fishing and gathering, cash is still a necessity.

It takes money, Coffing explained, to repair and maintain the residents' small boats, outboard motors and snowmobiles, as well as to buy gasoline — ever

more expensive — and the hunting and fishing tools necessary for harvesting and gathering wild food like berries and greens from the land. There are also electric and telephone bills to pay, plus costs for fuel oil, though



Photo by Maj. Mike Coffing, Alaska Wing

Even the CAP plane is dressed for winter as 2nd Lt. Chet Harris and Col. Skip Widtfeldt wait in Bethel to load their GA-8 with food for delivery to the Delta.

supplemented with wood, that heats most homes.

Mother Nature offered no relief this season, sending an early and harsh winter that started in September with record low temperatures. Subsequently, the Yukon River froze earlier than usual, so fuel had to be flown in — a more expensive option than going by riverboat and one that had to be initiated sooner than expected.

“While Alaska is certainly a wild and beautiful place,” Coffing said, “the days when a family could live off the land without also having a source of cash income have indeed been gone for quite some time.”

## *Where the next meal comes from*

The state is well aware of the Delta crisis. To address the high cost of fuel, in 2008 Alaska gave

many residents \$1,200 energy rebate checks, but this fell short of paying even one month's winter home fuel bill. Thankfully, the onset of summer will alleviate heating costs. To address the food shortage, the state extended moose-hunting season.

Declaring the situation an emergency could open up the area to relief from the federal government and agencies like the Red Cross, but current Alaska law prohibits such a declaration when the yearly average income exceeds \$26,500, despite the extreme cost of living. (In Alaska, the 2009 poverty level exceeds that amount for families with four or more members.) Gov. Sarah Palin's office and other state agencies are investigating ways to change or legally circumvent this law.

Still, in Alaska, winter comes early and lasts a long time, and Coffing does not see the Delta crisis ending anytime soon. In just a few short months, the cycle of survival will begin again. ▲

*Some information used in this story came from the February 2009 CNN article, "In Rural Alaska Villages, Families Struggle to Survive," by Mallory Simon.*



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