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From the Los Angeles Times

In rural Alaska, villagers suffer in near silence

Bush residents struggle to balance the need for food with the need for fuel -- the building blocks of survival in a frigid winter that has months to go. Some call for massive airlifts of aid.

By Kim Murphy

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Reporting from Tuluksak, Alaska — As the temperature plunged to minus-40 degrees last month, Nastasia Wassilie waited.

The 61-year-old widow had run out of wood and fuel oil, and had no money to buy more. Nor was there much food in the house. But people here in rural Alaska try to take care of themselves. Her sister would come to help. Surely she would.

Nearly three days later, when neighbors learned of Wassilie's plight, the Tribal Council put out a call on the VHF radio that is the lifeline for most of the far-flung Yupik Eskimo villages along this remote stretch of the Kuskokwim River.

People who had enough gas for their snowmobiles immediately set off across miles of tundra, hauling firewood back to Wassilie's small house. A few offered helpings of dry fish, which most families keep in the larder for winter.

There was little more they could do. Nearly every one of Tuluksak's roughly 500 residents is performing a perilous balancing act between food and fuel -- the building blocks of survival in a frigid winter that still has months to go.

Life in rural Alaska always has been treacherous. But last year's dramatic escalation in fuel prices, combined with a disastrous fishing season, plunged the ramshackle villages of America's frontier into one of the worst crises in decades, prompting calls for humanitarian aid and demands for pricing reform.

"Holy Jiminy Christmas, what we're going through," said Dora Napoka, 49, the librarian at the village school. "It's like we have to choose between six gallons of stove oil or six gallons of gas to go out and get the firewood -- or does my baby need infant milk? Which one is more important?"

The public alarm first sounded from Emmonak, a town of about 800 people near the mouth of the Yukon River, when Nicholas Tucker polled fellow villagers and found many in a state of desperation: They were running out of food after paying up to \$200 a week for fuel oil to heat their homes.

"Help is needed and cannot be delayed," Tucker wrote in an open letter to state authorities that was published in several rural newspapers this month, requesting a "massive airlift" of food.

"What is mind-boggling about the whole situation is that they have remained silent, anonymous, suffered, and cried," he said.

Tucker included a terse case list of 25 households he had contacted. It read like a report from a Third World country.

"Near-middle-aged couple, family of six. The husband cried as he was talking to me. . . .," one summary read. receives a very small unemployment income and is out of fuel a lot. . . . His family has been out of food for qui

some time now. Their 1-year-old child is out of milk, can't get it and [the father] has no idea when he will be able to get the next can. He has been borrowing milk from anyone he can. His moose meat supply is running out. . . . The electricity has skyrocketed and he can't pay all the bills."

From a couple in their mid-30s: "He and his girlfriend have no heating fuel. Whatever money he gets goes to getting gasoline for his snow machine to get logs. . . . Today, they had nothing for breakfast. Most of the time, they have some dry fish for lunch or cup of noodles with [crackers]."

As word of Emmonak's troubles spread, donations from across the country poured in. On Wednesday, a shipment of 5,300 pounds of food and other basic supplies was delivered by plane.

But regional leaders say dozens of rural villages -- where unemployment is at 65% and higher -- quietly are enduring similar emergencies.

The main reason is the price of heating fuel, which warms homes and powers village electrical plants. While the rest of the United States has seen prices ease since last summer, most Alaskan villages had to lock in purchase contracts for their fall fuel deliveries while costs were at their peak.

Worse, some villages weren't able to get their bulk deliveries of winter fuel by barge because the early onset of winter froze the river. Much of the fuel now must be flown in, which makes it even more expensive. Residents in Tuluksak are paying \$6.99 a gallon for heating fuel, up more than \$2 from last year, and \$6.58 for gasoline. In some villages, prices have climbed past \$8 a gallon.

A typical home here is a small, primitive cabin without running water that may shelter more than a dozen people. Even a family with a modern, efficient stove will spend \$185 a week for heating.

"The oil is drilled right here in Alaska, and yet we're paying \$8 a gallon? Something is amiss here. The oil companies are making billions of dollars, and people here can't afford to eat," said Pat Samson, social services director for the Assn. of Village Council Presidents in Bethel, about 35 miles southwest of Tuluksak.

The price for heating fuel and gas is only the beginning of the story. Groceries must be flown in at ever-higher freight prices. A pound of hot dogs in the village store costs \$7.39, and a two-pound loaf of domestic cheese runs \$17.49. A loaf of Wonder Bread is \$5.85.

The cost of flying to Bethel has risen to \$186 for a round trip, so few go there to shop -- and even fewer make the trip to the dentist or hospital until ailments become urgent.

In earlier years, hunting, fishing and trapping helped villagers get by. But the market for fur has disappeared, and the fish stock has declined precipitously. Last year, there was no commercial fishing season at all for the region's mainstay, chinook salmon. Moose hunting, also because of declining numbers, hasn't been allowed around Tuluksak for five years.

"Me, I have 17 people living in my house," said Elena Gregory, the Tribal Council secretary. She is the only breadwinner in a household that includes her husband -- a seasonally employed carpenter -- four daughters, two sons-in-law and nine grandchildren.

"I'm lucky because I have a full-time job. . . . Most people are two weeks on, two weeks off," a job-sharing arrangement devised to spread out the village's 34 available jobs, Gregory said.

"Right now, my truck and my snow machine are out there rusting, because I can't afford gas for them," said Rache Sallaffie, a teacher's aide. "But we're lucky. I have four freezers of birds and fish, and two months ago my husband got a caribou, so we still have meat."

Samson, an Alaska Native who grew up in the region before going away to college in Fairbanks, helps villagers

here apply for fuel subsidies and other aid programs.

Walking through lots filled with abandoned vans and pickups -- the remnants of an era when the fishing was good enough that people could afford cars and could repair them when they broke down -- he pointed to a shack made of weathered plywood, its roof ripped open to the chilly sky.

"This guy asked for help fixing his house, but I couldn't do it -- too dangerous for the workers," he said.

"When I started this job, I was going to pay my student loans and then just work menial jobs after that, go commercial fishing in the summer. Now, I've been to just about all these villages, and I've seen things -- things that keep me working," he said. "It was going to be a six-month job, and come September, I'll be doing this for 18 years."

The state has sent fact-finding delegations to the hardest-hit rural areas. Bill McAllister, spokesman for Gov. Sarah Palin, said officials were in the process of finding aid programs already in place that could be extended immediately to help afflicted families.

The governor shepherded rural fuel subsidies and a \$1,200-per-person fuel rebate through the Legislature last summer in anticipation of the high prices, and now is looking to see what more can be done, McAllister said.

But doing much more can be politically difficult in a state where urban residents often resent the substantial subsidies that keep rural Alaska afloat.

Stories about Emmonak prompted a number of angry comments to the Anchorage Daily News, some noting that rural families often collect tens of thousands of dollars from the state's annual oil dividends and from annual tribal corporation payouts, and asking why city dwellers should subsidize them even more.

"Folks who live in the bush do so because of a personal choice. Some just have the concept now that they need not save and conserve because the government will pay their way," one letter said. "When you are not able to live there for whatever reason, then move."

At the moment, villagers in Tuluksak say their greatest hope is that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez will come through again on his pledge to deliver free fuel to Native Americans -- a promise that could mean 100 gallons for many families.

"What most people do not realize is that what our country as a whole has been seeing for the past year or so is nothing compared to the economic conditions that have been prevailing in many of our Native communities for 100 years," Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) told the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on Jan. 15.

"It is truly tragic," she said, "that Alaska Native villages must depend on Venezuela for their safety net."

There is talk of distributing state-funded fuel vouchers to ease the crisis until spring. But Tuluksak residents say one is expecting much from Juneau.

"Two governors ago, we were promised no more honey buckets in the villages. And yet you see we still have the honey buckets," said Gregory, referring to the portable toilets that are a pungent feature everywhere in Tuluksak except the school.

"Sarah Palin got us the fuel rebate, but she never promised anything," Samson said. "Which I guess is to her credit."

Wassilie was making her way to the village post office the other day -- her slight, shuffling figure smothered in a dark parka, moving like a blackbird on the snow.

Asked why she had waited so long to seek help, she shrugged, and smiled, and blinked, and didn't answer at all.

Tucker says he's seen the same thing all over. Shame. Pride. Silence.

"You would think a Yupik village like this would be aware of its neighbors' needs, but we weren't, because people were so shy and quiet," he said. "They were suffering alone. Like one of them said during our testimonials with the state officials, 'I thought I was the only one.' "

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