

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta

A look at the Wade Hampton and Bethel census areas



The picturesque coastline of this southwestern Alaska region is marked by the mighty Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers spilling out into the Bering Sea. The alluvial deposits left by the rivers' wanderings formed the landscape now known as the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

Bounded to the south by the Kuskokwim Mountains and to the north by the Nulato Hills, the river basins occupied by these sinusoidal monsters and their tributaries provided a setting for the original inhabitants, the Yupik, to maintain a seminomadic subsistence lifestyle. Settlements were temporary, and tribes followed the same yearly migration as game and fish.

With western influence and the construction of church installations, seasonal camps became permanent settlements. European settlers established the lower Yukon River as a transfer point and set up trading posts for Gold Rush-era entrepreneurs who traveled as far inland as Dawson City in Canada's Yukon Territory.

Proximity to the water is key to the locations of the villages, which either lie on the coast or dot the

banks of these rivers and their inland tributaries.

Modern geopolitical boundaries define this region as the Bethel and Wade Hampton census areas. Although the two are combined here, the sparsely populated and remote villages that make up these two census areas are separated by large distances and economic gaps.

45 of 47 villages have fewer than 1,000 residents

Russian Orthodox and Jesuit missionaries, gold miners, and fishermen have made their mark on the area but the region's population of 25,300 remains about 87 percent Alaska Native.

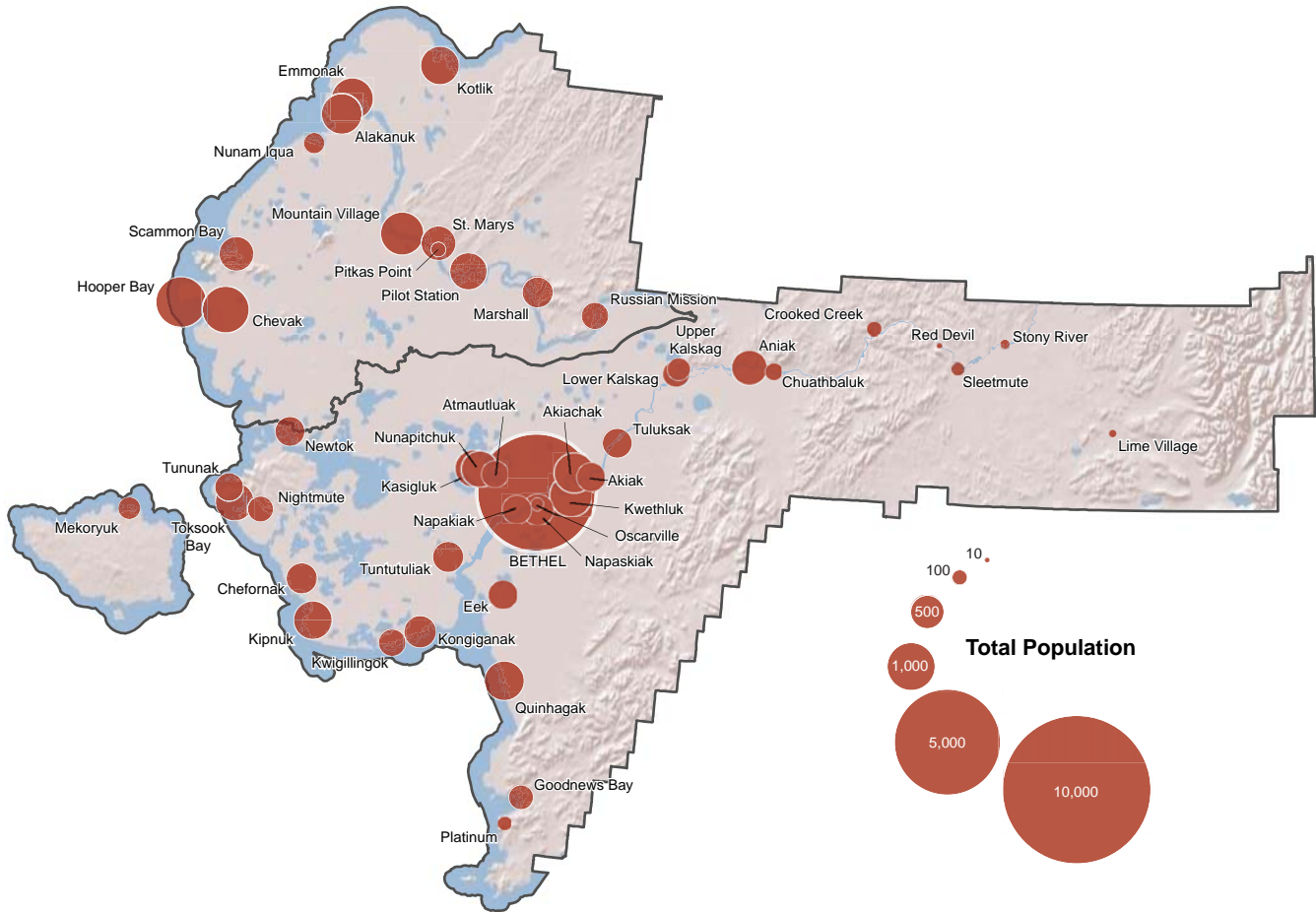
According to the 2010 Census, 17,000 of the Alaska Natives in the area were Yupik, and about 1,400 identified as Inupiat or other Alaska Native. The Alaska Native Language Center estimates that about 10,000 people statewide speak Central Yupik, and although that participation outpaces other tribal language groups because of early missionary scholarship, it remains a threatened language.

The region's population has grown steadily since 1990 — a few hundred per year on average — due mostly to high birth rates and low out-migration.

Forty-five of the area's 47 villages have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. The two exceptions are Hooper Bay (1,114 in 2012) and the city of Bethel (6,113), the regional hub. (See Exhibit 1.) Bethel is also the most racially diverse community, with 65 percent Alaska Natives, 23.3 percent whites, and the remainder identifying as another race or two or more races. Bethel's range of services creates demand for labor that isn't available in the small villages so it attracts outsiders, contributing to Bethel's lower proportion of Natives.



Above: Lime Village, a census-designated place in the Bethel Census Area, had a population of 29 people living in 11 households at the time of the 2010 Census. The village has also been known as Hungry Village and Hek'dichen Hdakaq. Photo by Gary Holton



Economic challenges

The fragmented and insulated distribution of the region's villages creates far different economic conditions for households than in more populated parts of Alaska. Though the Y-K Delta resembles other rural areas in some ways, its other economic indicators reach the extremes. For example:

- Poverty and unemployment rates in the region, excluding Bethel, are among the highest in the nation. Similarly, average wages per job and per capita incomes are among the lowest. The Wade Hampton Census Area's per capita income was \$22,000 in 2011, the lowest in Alaska and less than half the statewide average of \$45,700. The Bethel Census Area ranked sixth-lowest at \$32,100.
- The cost of living is high, and not just because prices are high due to transportation costs. Because subsistence work requires high amounts of time and energy, the cost of living is also high from an opportunity-cost perspective.
- Government has become a tenuous and poten-

tially unsustainable source of funding. Government employment in the area has been flat for a decade and the future of federal funding in particular is unknown.

- Outside government, commercial fishing is the only industry that brings in money from outside the region. Fisheries' performance can fluctuate wildly from year to year.

Geography also provides a daunting challenge because of isolation and limited resources. Obstacles these villages face include permafrost, bank erosion, and harsh winters. Some originally mobile communities that have become fixed in a particular spot are seeing the land washed out from under their structures.

Half of jobs in government

Government employment is the largest source of wage and salary jobs in the region, and it hasn't grown in the last decade. Wade Hampton's employment was 69 percent government, the highest rate in Alaska and among the highest in the country. The Bethel Census Area had a higher share of

1 Y-K Villages Population, 2012

	Population
Regional total	25,300
Bethel Census Area	17,600
Akiachak	663
Akiak	361
Aniak	541
Atmautluak	302
Bethel	6,113
Chefornak	434
Chuathbaluk	138
Crooked Creek	90
Eek	339
Goodnews Bay	258
Kasigluk	594
Kipnuk	641
Kongiganak	464
Kwethluk	751
Kwigillingok	317
Lime Village	27
Lower Kalskag	306
Mekoryuk	210
Napakiak	358
Napaskiak	434
Newtok	377
Nightmute	294
Nunapituchuk	549
Oscarville	69
Platinum	74
Quinhagak	689
Red Devil	19
Sleetmute	84
Stony River	42
Toksook Bay	638
Tuluksak	384
Tuntutuliak	420
Tununak	354
Upper Kalskag	214
Balance	52
Wade Hampton CA	7,700
Alakanuk	707
Chevak	970
Emmonak	755
Hooper Bay	1,114
Kotlik	628
Marshall	414
Mountain Village	830
Nunam Iqua	185
Pilot Station	597
Pitkas Point	102
Russian Mission	312
St. Mary's	524
Scammon Bay	536
Balance	26

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section



Above, Hooper Bay, a village in the Wade Hampton Census Area, is also known as Naparyarmiut in Central Yupik. Photo by C.T. Liotta

private sector jobs, with 45 percent government employment in 2012, or 3,120 jobs. (See Exhibit 2.) About half the region's government jobs are in education, with five local school districts and a small Bethel extension of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Tribal government jobs numbered 1,040 in 2012. Local councils often provide services that would ordinarily be administered privately, from village utilities to construction to public health clinics.

Private employment increased by 21 percent in the region between 2001 and 2003 due to expansion of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, the region's largest private employer; new seafood processing firms; and increased construction from bulk-fuel capacity increases and other capital construction projects. After the 2003 peak of 4,600 jobs, private employment slowly declined until 2008 and then began to recover, reaching 4,515 jobs in 2012.

Bethel aids village life

Bethel had more than 60 percent of the region's private jobs in 2012. The city hosts the region's large health and social care centers, housing authority, and air transportation headquarters. Breaking down Bethel's impact as the regional hub

is difficult — for instance, the regional health center's coverage area includes all communities but the jobs and wages are counted in Bethel. The same is true for Grant Air and Hageland Aviation, whose pilots provide essential air transportation between villages.

Plans for a movie theater in the region's "big city" are in the works, and other capital improvements could result in minor growth for private employment. Some of the boost from construction work would be temporary, however.

Outside Bethel, private jobs mostly basic services

With the exception of two fish plants and a branch of the regional health care corporation, few large firms generate jobs in the villages outside of Bethel. Most private employment in the villages is connected to Native corporations, including many of the general stores.

In 2012, 70 village stores accounted for 745 jobs, and local utility, weatherization, and construction firms had 240 jobs. Crucial bush airlines provide about 75 year-round jobs. The remaining 350 often part-time positions were either related to the corporations or the roughly 20 other small private village enterprises.

Fishing provides seasonal work

Canneries provide seafood processing jobs from May to October, with the fishing season typically running from June to August. Cannery employment peaked in July of 2012 at 805, buoying rural employment.

Low salmon returns on the Yukon River have been a concern in recent years, putting pressure on both commercial and subsistence users. King and chum are the two most important species to the area, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game reports that king have been in a “prolonged period of low productivity.” Chum returns have been better, but erratic since 1993. These lower runs combined with high fuel prices have made the economics of salmon fishing challenging, and subsistence has also been restricted.

The Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission estimates that in 2012, the 1,126 fishermen in the two census areas harvested \$7.5 million in seafood, mostly from salmon. Price fluctuations put this value in the middle historically, despite lower runs.

In 1992, a community development quota group created a pollock allocation for western Alaska, adding halibut and sablefish in 1995 and crab in 1998. Coastal Villages Regional Fund is the CDQ group for 20 of the region’s communities, and qual-

2 Half of Jobs Are in Government

Y-K Delta employment and wages, 2012

	Jobs	Wages
Total employment	9,308	\$318,682,602
Bethel Census Area employment	6881	\$260,098,498
Wade Hampton Census Area employment	2427	\$58,584,104
Total private sector jobs	4526	\$170,131,946
Natural Resources and Mining	23	\$2,080,153
Utilities	117	\$2,847,187
Construction	64	\$5,018,099
Manufacturing	253	\$6,250,876
Wholesale and Retail Trade	1040	\$20,212,329
Transportation	448	\$17,899,152
Financial Services	402	\$16,325,289
Professional And Business Services	106	\$5,248,975
Education and Health Care	1282	\$70,005,686
Leisure and Hospitality	147	\$1,675,293
Other Services	644	\$22,568,907
Total government	4782	\$148,550,656
Federal government	109	\$5,174,729
State government	377	\$26,312,053
Local government	4296	\$117,063,874
Local government education	2131	\$76,769,335
Tribal government	1038	\$18,272,210

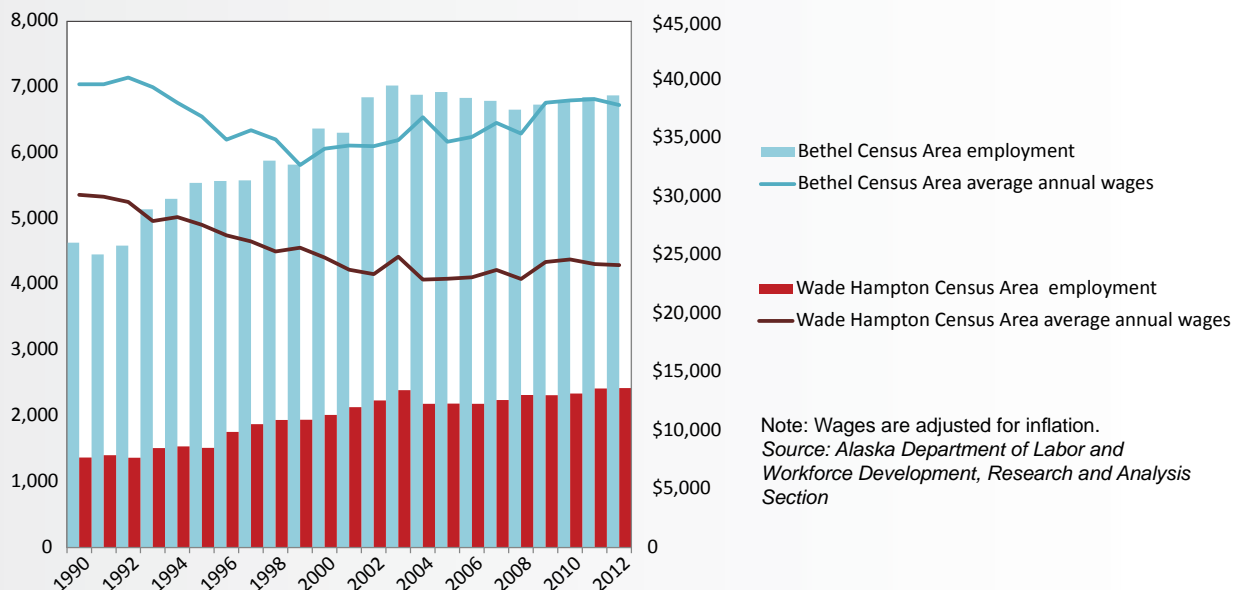
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

ified residents can obtain quota from the group. CVRF also owns a fleet that runs commercial pollock and crab vessels in the Bering Sea, and

See Y-K DELTA, page 15

3 Steady Growth in Jobs, But Average Wages Fell Through the '90s

Wade Hampton and Bethel census areas, 1990 to 2012



Safety Minute

Free course will help meet OSHA-required hazard training

In 2012, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration incorporated the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Hazardous Chemicals as part of the Hazard Communication Standard, 29 CFR 1910.1200. **Employers are legally required to train employees on the new label elements and safety data sheet format by Dec. 1.**

Don't be caught out of compliance. The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Occupational Safety and Health Section will offer free training to help employers meet this deadline. The training will include:

- An explanation of GHS
- HazCom 2012 and "The Right to Understand"
- New chemical labeling system and pictograms
- Format of safety data sheets (SDS)

- Important implementation dates

Classes will be held at the following locations on these dates:

OCT 15:
4325 Cinch St.
Fairbanks

OCT. 23:
3301 Eagle St. Room 104
Anchorage

OCT. 15:
1111 W. 8th St. Room 303
Juneau

For more information, times, and to register, please contact AKOSH training specialist Elaine Banda at (907) 269-4951 or elaine.banda@alaska.gov. Space is limited, so please register today.

Seafood safety training available Oct. 9 and 10 in Anchorage

The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Occupational Safety and Health Section will present a 10-hour seafood safety training course in Anchorage Oct. 9 and 10 at the department's Eagle Street location.

These free classes will be from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day and include the following modules:

- Introduction to OSHA
- Personal Protective Equipment
- Confined Space
- Lock Out Tag Out
- Slips, Trips, and Falls
- Machine Guarding
- Cuts and Lacerations
- Reports and Investigations
- PSM and Ammonia
- Ergonomics
- Marine Terminals
- Electrical Safety
- Material Handling
- Emergency Action Plans
- Hazard Communications
- Sanitation and Chemical Handling
- Health Hazards
- Bloodborne Pathogens

The seafood processing industry is a business with a high accident rate where education and training can significantly improve injury statistics. This course, which is a cooperative effort by AKOSH and Trident Seafoods, has been developed to provide floor managers, line managers, maintenance personnel, and plant workers with a better understanding of workplace hazards.

Each successful student will receive an AKOSH 10-hour Seafood Safety Training Card, which certifies completion of the course. It is important to note this training does not satisfy safety requirements for employers to provide training for specific programs; these courses are for awareness only.

To apply for this class, contact seafood coordinator Mike Buck at (907) 269-4946 or mike.buck@alaska.gov. The office is located at 3301 Eagle St., Anchorage, 99503.

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owns and operates the Goodnews Bay processing plant and halibut-buying stations in the coastal communities. The plant made news early this year when it announced a \$10 hourly starting wage for processors, which is about \$3 higher than the industry standard.

Subsistence a key resource

Fish camps are still an iconic image of the river lands, with

dried salmon hanging on racks and the smell of alder smoke. Salmon and other fish are the most common subsistence resources in the region, and trapping also plays a part.

The climate also allows delta subsistence users to hunt and gather a wider variety of plants and animals than their northern Inupiat counterparts. Subsistence is essential to augment residents' diets because of the low availability of jobs and the high cost of food in grocery stores, especially in the smaller villages. Although relocating to a more urban area might mean more available jobs, subsistence is also part of Native cultural heritage, which creates strong ties to the land and its resources.