

# ALASKA



## FOOD COALITION

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"We sometimes feel that what we do is just a drop in the Ocean; but the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." -- *Mother Teresa*

### When Subsistence Isn't Enough

#### Supplementing Subsistence

Subsistence is defined in Alaska state laws as the "noncommercial customary and traditional uses" of fish and wildlife. Subsistence foods are especially nutritious as they are dense in protein, iron, vitamin B12, polyunsaturated fats, monounsaturated fats and omega-3 fatty acids. In addition, they are low in saturated fat, added sugar and salt. Meats such as moose and caribou are generally lean. Berries and greens are high in water content, micronutrients and low in empty calories. The wild food harvested in rural Alaska contains about 242% of USDA recommended protein requirements and about 35% of the caloric requirements of the rural population. The caloric shortfall is made up with purchased foods imported to rural Alaska. A poor subsistence harvest can be devastating to a community and increase its food insecure population. The 2006 Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) identified rural Alaskans as having some of the highest food insecurity rates in Alaska:

#### Adults (18+)

Anchorage and Vicinity 9.8%  
Gulf Coast 10.9%  
Southeast 7.4%  
*Rural 21.8%*  
Fairbanks and Vicinity 9.2%

#### Children (<18)

Anchorage and Vicinity 14.1%  
Gulf Coast 13.8%  
Southeast 8.8%  
*Rural 26.4%*  
Fairbanks and Vicinity 14.0%

#### Households

Anchorage and Vicinity 10.0%  
Gulf Coast 10.0%  
Southeast 7.7%  
*Rural 19.7%*  
Fairbanks and Vicinity 9.8%

20% of Alaska's population lives in rural areas. Based on subsistence harvest levels, approximately 270 communities in Alaska are considered "rural". The Department of Public Assistance Coastal Region has field offices in Bethel, Kenai, Kotzebue and Nome. These field offices serve numerous rural, off-road communities. 2011 Department of Public Assistance (DPA) data documents that an Alaska rural community with 500 – 800 residents might have 50 – 80 food stamp cases/families each month. Purchased and emergency food supplements are a necessity for many of Alaska's rural communities. This is the story of one pallet of emergency food in a rural Alaska community just before Thanksgiving 2011.

#### Co-op Food

Food Bank of Alaska (FBA) participates in a cooperative food program. The co-op program allows FBA to purchase often-requested and non-perishable items such as canned tuna, peanut butter, rice and canned vegetables at a reduced cost. The items are available for purchase to any FBA partner agency accessing donated food. Agencies pay for the cost of food and shipping. The list of items changes frequently. Here is what one off-road Alaska community ordered last November:

<u>Item</u>	<u>Cases</u>	<u>Pounds/case</u>	<u>Cans/case</u>	<u>Size</u>
Beans and franks, large	20	26	24	15 oz
Corn muffin mix	20	16	12	16 oz
Green beans	15	27	24	15 oz
Tomatoes, diced	7	25	24	14.1oz
Peanut butter	8	22	12	18 oz
Tuna	8	24	48	5 oz

## **Distribution Plans**

The Tribal Council in the aforementioned community created a plan to purchase and distribute the food to the families in need as quickly as possible. From the time the pallet of food arrived, the plan took three days to implement. First, council staff inventoried the shipment and created a spreadsheet of all the items: beans and franks-576 cans, corn muffin mix-240 boxes. Next, they created a Resources Committee, community members who made recommendations on who would get the food. The committee made their distribution decisions based on food stamps program participation, family size and need. Approximately 50 – 60 families in this community participate in the food stamp program. Family names were added to the spreadsheet; food was allocated by family size. While the food was being distributed, committee members made themselves available to explain the selection process to community members. Distribution was done with fairness, quickly and respectfully. The committee was able to assure community members the food would be distributed to those who needed it the most.

## **Delivery**

The shipment weighed 1788 pounds total. The cost of shipping via bypass was \$545.31. Established in the 1970s to help move goods to rural Alaska affordably, the bypass system subsidizes mail delivery to off-road communities. It allows rural Alaskans to pay postal prices for freight (over 1,000 pounds) sent by rural air carrier. At Food Bank of Alaska, when a shipment is ready for delivery to a rural community the USPS is contacted, Food Bank of Alaska is told which airline will take it and at what time. The shipment is delivered directly to that air carrier, bypassing the post office completely. Bypass shipping costs are much less than regular air freight rates or parcel post for the shipper, but still much higher than what most food banks in the Lower 48 pay for truck shipping.

## **Obstacles**

Shipping is only one factor that makes food distribution in rural Alaska a challenge. Another prohibitive issue is the IRS rule that allows only 501(c) (3) non-profit or religious organizations to distribute donated food. In most villages, often the regional or village Alaska Native Corporation would be the most appropriate or only organization capable of managing food distribution. These native corporations are for-profit corporations, not 501(c) (3)'s. Until these and other root economic causes of food insecurity can be resolved, emergency food supplements will be required to ensure all Alaskans have access to nutritious food.

## **Resources**

Facing Hunger in America Blog

<http://facinghungerinamerica.blogspot.com/2011/07/ensuring-that-no-one-in-alaska-goes.html>

Subsistence Economies in Rural Alaska

<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/subsistence-economies-rural-alaska>

Dietary intake of Alaska Native people

<http://www.anthc.org/chs/wp/nutrition/upload/68-2-Johnson-2.pdf>

DHHS: Food Insecurity in Alaska

<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/pubs/assets/ChroniclesV1-4.pdf>

*The Alaska Food Coalition is here to help. Copies of Alaska Food Coalition White Papers are available Online: <http://www.alaskafood.org/whitepapers.shtml> for additional information, contact Vanessa Salinas, Alaska Food Coalition Manager: [afc@foodbankofalaska.org](mailto:afc@foodbankofalaska.org)*

**NEXT MONTH: Building a Healthy America: Food Stamp Profile**