

Aid arriving for western villages

By ANNE SUTTON

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Winter dealt a brutal hand to villages in Western Alaska this year.

Residents of these tiny remote fishing communities have been hammered by extreme cold, exorbitant fuel prices and poor fish harvests, forcing many to choose between buying fuel to heat their homes or food to feed their families.

They had been suffering in silence or calling on relatives for help.

Until Nick Tucker Sr. of Emmonak stepped in. The 63-year-old fisherman and his family of 10 were having a tough time and he put out a call over the VHF radio in early January to ask if other families were in the same boat.

The calls started rolling in.

"When people tell me their young ones are having no milk or a man is forgoing his meal so his wife and children can eat; when people are telling me they are eating fish and moose meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner or going a few days without food; when people are hungry, it's severe. It's a crisis," Tucker said.

That prompted Tucker to write an e-mail detailing the village's woes and asking for help in the form of food donations and cash, and he sent it to everyone he could think of.

Those efforts are starting to pay off.

About 20,000 pounds of food has been delivered so far to Emmonak, a village of about 850 people 500 miles west of Anchorage. And villages in similar straits are starting to receive assistance as well, said Cindy Beans with the Emmonak Tribal Council.

"And they are calling to say, 'Thank you Emmonak,' for being on the front page for the rest of rural Alaska," Beans said. "It's embarrassing for people to ask for help."

Help has arrived in various forms from individuals, businesses and faith-based groups around the state and beyond.

Rep. Jay Ramras, R-Fairbanks, and Sen. Donny Olson, D-Nome, recently visited the village of Kotlik to see how people are faring.

Residents on snowmachines picked them up at the airport and took them to a community meeting where about 30 people had gathered.

"We asked how many received food and donated supplies, because we'd already done the first airlift of 4,465 pounds, and every one of the community members raised their hands," Ramras said.

Ramras has been mobilizing churches, communities, food banks and other organizations to collect food and cash donations in Fairbanks and Anchorage. He says 11 villages in the region are in need of assistance and finding transportation to the remote locations has been a headache.

Earlier this month, he got into a spat with Gov. Sarah Palin, that played out in dueling press releases, after he criticized her for not doing more to free up state planes to assist.

Palin said Department of Public Safety aircraft already have made a couple of deliveries to Kotlik, though Ramras said much more help is needed.

He said he's been contacted by some private pilots as well as the Christian Pilots Association who are willing to help.

"I just hope the attention will be a catalyst to create an action plan at the state level because we are mindful of the calendar," Ramras said.

Palin said Wednesday that food and fuel are available in the villages, the problem is that people can't afford them.

A state team has visited villages to sign people up for food stamps and fuel and cash assistance programs, and officials said they have made those applications a priority.

State and federal agencies have expanded moose hunting opportunities to help people fill their freezers, though high fuel prices often make hunting prohibitively expensive.

Also, the state department of labor will explore ways to link people up with seafood processing jobs outside the village and the Alaska Housing Finance Corp. plans to train villagers to weatherize homes, thus saving on fuel costs and providing some work.

"We need to remember the plight out there in western Alaska did not happen overnight so the solutions to these problems will not be found overnight either. That's why we are working on it, holistically, short-term and long-term," Palin said.

Jobs are scarce in rural Alaska. Most residents in the region depend on the chum and king salmon fishing seasons for both cash and food, but this year's harvest was dismal.

Tribal council member Lorrena Prince said she spent \$1,000 on nets and fuel for the boat, and she made \$200 selling fish.

Meanwhile she's paying \$7.81 a gallon for stove oil. That's because the river froze early this year requiring pricey bulk fuel be flown in.

"Even if you have a job like me, I have to charge for stove oil. It's very expensive," Prince said. "Lots of people are struggling."

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