

## 4.3.2 Western Alaska

### Communities

[Akiachak](#)

[Aleknagik](#)

[Bethel](#)

[Chefornak](#)

[Clark's Point](#)

[Dillingham](#)

[Eek](#)

[Ekuk](#)

[Ekwok](#)

[Emmonak](#)

[Goodnews Bay](#)

[Hooper Bay](#)

[Kipnuk](#)

[Koliganek](#)

[Kongiganak](#)

[Kotlik](#)

[Kwigillingok](#)

[Manokotak](#)

[Marshall](#)

[Mekoryuk](#)

[Napakiak](#)

[New Stuyahok](#)

[Newtok](#)

[Nightmute](#)

[Pilot Station](#)

[Platinum](#)

[Portage Creek](#)

[Quinhagak](#)

[Saint Mary's](#)

[Scammon Bay](#)

[Togiak](#)

[Toksook Bay](#)

[Tuntutuliak](#)

[Tununak](#)

[Twin Hills](#)

### Geographic Location

Western Alaska includes three census areas: Wade Hampton, Bethel, and Dillingham. Most of the communities in the region lie within the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, a vast area of low-lying land along the Bering Sea coast, some 300-500 miles west of Anchorage. From north to south, the area stretches from Kotlik, at 63.034° N Lat, to Clark's Point, at 58.844° N Lat.

### Weather

Weather throughout the region is diverse. Communities in the southern part of the region and those located along the Bering Sea Coast are influenced by maritime currents and tend to have more moderate weather, with winter temperatures averaging 5-30°F and summer temperatures averaging 35-65°F. Precipitation is also greater here, averaging around 30 inches per year. By contrast, communities in the northern portion of the region, as well as those located away from the moderating influence of the ocean, have more extreme weather. Winter temperatures average between -2°F and 20°F, and summer temperatures average between 42 °F and 62 °F. Precipitation is much lower in the northern and inland areas, averaging around 16 inches annually. Because of the topography of the region, which is characterized by vast expanses of low-lying land crisscrossed by rivers, periodic flooding is commonplace.

### General Characterization

Western Alaska is home to a predominantly Yup'ik Eskimo population. In contrast to many other parts of Alaska, native cultural traditions are a vital part of everyday life here. In 2000, approximately 90% of residents of Western Alaska were Alaska Native or part Native, and many residents still speak their Native Alaskan language. Despite its vast geographical size, Western Alaska's population is sparse, amounting to just under 28,000 people. The larger towns in the region—Bethel, Dillingham, and Hooper Bay—account for nearly one-third of the population of the entire region. The remaining residents are scattered throughout dozens of small villages in the region, accessible only by air or water.

The economies of communities throughout the region depend heavily on the commercial fishing industry. The salmon and herring fisheries of Bristol Bay and Kuskokwim Bay account for a majority of fishing activity. In addition, major fish processing plants are located in Bethel and Dillingham. Many smaller communities also have village processing plants. Regional and local Native governments also constitute a major source of employment. Economic development, however, has been slow in Western Alaska. The poverty rate, at more than 20%, is higher than most areas of Alaska. An unemployment rate of 9% and a relatively low annual per capita income pose additional challenges.

## Institutional Framework

There are no organized boroughs in Western Alaska. The region is made up of three census areas: Wade Hampton, Bethel, and Dillingham. Most communities have either incorporated city governments or federally recognized Native village councils, or both.

There are three community development quota (CDQ) groups that operate in the region, including the Yukon Delta Fisheries Development Association, the Coastal Villages Region Fund, and the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation. These groups allocate a portion of commercial fisheries revenues toward promoting community development and employment. In addition, the Calista Corporation, the second largest of 13 regional corporations formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), is an important body of Native governance. The Calista Corporation holds a federal land entitlement and seeks to promote natural resource development and employment for Alaska Natives in the region.

### Commercial, Sport, and Subsistence Fisheries

The economy of Western Alaska revolves around fishing. Large commercial fleets are based in larger hubs, such as Dillingham, with more extensive port facilities; however, every community profiled in this section, no matter how small, participates in commercial fishing as a home port for vessels, a base for crew members, or as a site of fishing processing.

Commercial fishing in the region is centered in both Kuskokwim Bay and Bristol Bay, considered the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world. Commercial catches of salmon and herring make up the bulk of fishing activity, but other species such as halibut and groundfish are also important. In addition, many communities have commercial fish processing and storage facilities. Although the larger commercial processors are located primarily in larger hubs such as Bethel and Dillingham, many smaller communities have their own village-based fish processing facilities.

Sport fishing in Western Alaska, in comparison to other regions, is a relatively small enterprise. While several thousand sport fishing licenses are sold each year throughout the region, mostly in the larger hubs of Dillingham and Bethel, the region does not draw nearly as many visitors as Southeastern or South-central Alaska. Major sport fish species include

salmon, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden, arctic grayling, and northern pike.

Partly as a result of the strong Native cultural traditions throughout the region, Western Alaskan residents depend heavily on subsistence fish and other resources. Communities large and small supplement their formal economies with subsistence resources. According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, on average, more than 95% of all households in the region harvest subsistence fish, including salmon and non-salmon species. In addition, land mammals such as caribou and moose, marine mammals such as harbor seals, and a wide variety of birds and eggs are used for subsistence by local residents. Subsistence harvests can be enormous; the village of Akiachak, for example, reported an average per capita harvest in 1998 of 1,328 lbs—one of the highest figures anywhere in Alaska.

### Regional Challenges

Western Alaska faces some dramatic economic and developmental challenges. Poverty rates are high and educational levels are low, a combination that has caused the region to lag somewhat behind other regions in terms of economic development. In addition, Western Alaska's communities, most of which are predominantly Yup'ik Eskimo, struggle to keep their cultural legacies alive. Facilities such as the Yup'it Piciryarait Museum, located in Bethel, play a vital role in the preservation of the local cultural heritage.

The region's high dependence on commercial fishing—and on salmon in particular—leads to some particular challenges. First, many small, remote communities must solve the logistical problem of harvesting fish in far-flung locations and shipping it to markets elsewhere. Most communities are forced to ship freshly caught fish by plane to a central processor in Bethel or elsewhere, where it is then forwarded along to markets. This process results in an additional economic burden that must be shouldered to communities. In addition, the region's high dependence on salmon during a time of price decline proves difficult. In recent years, foreign competition has driven down the market price of salmon in the U.S., causing financial trouble for many communities. Federal salmon disaster funds, distributed to large and small communities alike, represent only a partial solution to this problem.