

# 2020 census begins in a tiny Alaska town

By **MARK THIESSEN**  
Associated Press

TOKSOOK BAY, Alaska — There are no restaurants in Toksook Bay, Alaska. No motels or movie theater, either. There also aren't any factories. Or roads.

But the first Americans to be counted in the 2020 census live in this tiny community of 661 on the edge of the American expanse. Their homes are huddled together in a windswept Bering Sea village, painted vivid lime green, purple or neon blue to help distinguish the signs of life from a frigid white winterscape that makes it hard to tell where the frozen sea ends and the village begins.

Fish drying racks hang outside some front doors, and you're more likely to find a snowmobile or four-wheeler in the driveway than a truck or SUV.

In this isolated outpost that looks little like other towns in the rest of the United States, the official attempt to count everyone living in the country will begin Tuesday.

The decennial U.S. census has started in rural Alaska, out of tradition and necessity, ever since the U.S. purchased the territory from Russia in 1867.

Once the spring thaw hits, the town empties as many residents scatter for traditional hunting and fishing grounds, and the frozen ground that in January makes it easier to get around by March turns to marsh that's difficult to traverse. The mail service is spotty and the internet connectivity unreliable, which makes door-to-door surveying important.

For those reasons, they have to start early here.

The rest of the country, plus urban areas of Alaska such as Anchorage, will begin the census in mid-March.

Some of the biggest challenges to the count are especially difficult in Toksook Bay, one of a handful of villages on Nelson Island, which is about 500 miles west of Anchorage and only accessible by boat or plane.

Some people speak only Alaska Native languages such as Yup'ik, or speak one language but don't read it.

The U.S. census provides questionnaires in 13 languages, and other guides, glossaries and materials in many more. But none is one of 20 official Alaska Native languages. So local groups are bringing together translators and language experts to translate the census wording and intent so local community leaders could trust, understand and relay the importance of the census.

It wasn't an easy task. Language can be very specific to a culture.

For example, there's no equivalent for "apportionment" — the system used to determine representation in Congress — in the language Denaak'e, also known as Koyukon Athabascan. So translators used terms for divvying up moose meat in a village as an example for finding cultural relevancy, said Veri di Suvero, executive direc-



Gregory Bull/AP Photo

**George Chakuchin, left, and Mick Chakuchin look out over the Bering Sea near Toksook Bay, Alaska. The first Americans to be counted in the 2020 census starting Tuesday live in this Bering Sea coastal village.**

tor of the agency partner Alaska Public Interest Research Group.

When the official count begins this week, the Census Bureau has hired four people to go door-to-door. At least two of them will be fluent in English and Yup'ik.

Places such as Toksook Bay that run this risk of being under-counted also desperately need the federal funds assigned based on population for health care, education and general infrastructure.

Yet mistrust of the federal government is high. That's true in many parts of the U.S., but especially in Alaska, where many have strong libertarian views, and even more in a rural community where everyone knows everyone, and someone asking for personal information is seen with suspicion.

"The No. 1 barrier to getting an accurate count throughout Alaska is concern about privacy and confidentiality and an inherent distrust of the federal government," said Gabriel Layman, chairman of the Alaska Census Working Group. "And that attitude is fairly pervasive in some of our more rural and remote communities."

The census is entirely confidential, Layman reassures people, and the Census Bureau can't give information to any law enforcement, immigration official to even to a landlord if you report if you have 14 people living in your rental. Violating that privacy could land a Census worker behind

bars with a hefty fine.

When the count begins on Tuesday, a Yup'ik elder who is part of a well-known Eskimo dancing group will be the first one counted.

Lizzie Chimiugak, whose age isn't known because records weren't kept but is anywhere from 89 to 93, is "the grandma for the whole community," said Robert Pitka, the tribal administrator of the Nunakauyak Traditional Council in Toksook Bay.

Steven Dillingham, the director of the U.S. Census Bureau, will be on hand for Tuesday's start.

Village officials will greet him at the town's airstrip and bring him to the school, where community members will bring traditional food, which could include seal, walrus, moose or musk ox. They'll have a ceremony with the dance group that includes Chimiugak, who will come to the school and dance in her wheelchair if the weather allows.

Mary Kailukiak, a town councilwoman, said she's one of the cooks.

"I'm thinking of maybe cooking up dried fish eggs, herring fish eggs," she said, pausing to speak to a reporter while ice fishing for tomcod and smolt on the Bering Sea, dressed in a black parka and snow pants and sporting a hat made by her daughter from sealskin and beaver. The eggs will be

soaked overnight and served with seal oil.

Then Dillingham will conduct the first official census count, or enumeration as it known, with Chimiugak, out of earshot of others to satisfy federal privacy laws.

Pitka is hoping for nice weather — it's been as cold as -20 Fahrenheit lately — as the nation's eyes turn west for the event: "It's going to be a very special moment."

Simeon John, who leads a youth suicide prevention group, stood before about 120 people at the end of the Sunday service at St. Peter the Fisherman Catholic Church. In Yup'ik, he told parishioners to expect strangers in town this week and why.

Beyond helping prepare for Tuesday's kickoff, he also encouraged them to take part in the census when a worker knocks on their door.

"That was one of the reasons why we encourage people to participate in as much as we can because of the benefits that we will be getting," said John, a community census helper.

Responses in the 2020 census could help residents in the future get improvements to the water facility, airport, port and even roads.

Besides announcements at church services, community leaders will repeat the same message this week to townspeople over marine VHF radio and through more modern means, including texting.

# Fires set stage for irreversible losses in Australia

By **MATTHEW BROWN and CHRISTINA LARSON**  
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Australia's forests are burning at a rate unmatched in modern times and scientists say the landscape is being permanently altered as a warming climate brings profound changes to the island continent.

Heat waves and drought have fueled bigger and more frequent fires in parts of Australia, so far this season torching some 40,000 square miles, an area about as big as Ohio.

With blazes still raging in the country's southeast, government officials are drawing up plans to reseed burned areas to speed up forest recovery that could otherwise take decades or even centuries.

But some scientists and forestry experts doubt that reseeded and other intervention efforts can match the scope of the destruction. The fires since September have killed 28 people and burned more than 2,600 houses.

Before the recent wildfires, ecologists divided up Australia's native vegetation into two categories: fire-adapted landscapes that burn periodically, and those that don't burn. In the recent fires, that distinction lost meaning — even rainforests and peat swamps caught fire, likely changing them forever.

Flames have blazed through jungles dried out by drought, such as Eungella National Park, where shrouds of mist have been replaced by smoke.

"Anybody would have said these forests don't burn, that there's not enough material and they are wet. Well they did," said forest restoration expert Sebastian Pfautsch, a research fellow at Western Sydney University.

"Climate change is happening now, and we are seeing the effects of it," he said.

High temperatures, drought and more frequent wildfires — all linked to climate change — may make it impossible for even fire-adapted forests to be fully restored, scientists say.

"The normal processes of recovery are going to be less effective, going to take longer," said Roger Kitching, an ecologist at Griffith University in Queensland. "Instead of an ecosystem taking a decade, it may take a century or more to recover, all assuming we don't get another fire season of this magnitude soon."



Rick Rycroft/AP Photo

**Sheep graze in a field shrouded with smoke haze near Burrigate, Australia.**

Young stands of mountain ash trees — which are not expected to burn because they have minimal foliage — have burned in the Australian Alps, the highest mountain range on the continent. Fire this year wiped out stands reseeded following fires in 2013.

Mountain ash, the world's tallest flowering trees, reach heights of almost 300 feet and live hundreds of years. They're an iconic presence in southeast Australia, comparable to the redwoods of Northern California, and are highly valued by the timber industry.

"I'm expecting major areas of (tree) loss this year, mainly because we will not have sufficient seed to sow them," said Owen Bassett of Forest Solutions, a private company that works with government agencies to reseed forests by helicopter following fires.

Bassett plans to send out teams to climb trees in parts of Victoria that did not burn to harvest seed pods. But he expects to get at most a ton of seeds this year, about one-tenth of what he said is needed.

Fire is a normal part of an ash forest life cycle, clearing out older stands to make way for new growth. But the extent and intensity of this year's fires left few surviving trees in many areas.

Already ash forests in parts of Victoria had been hit by wildfire every four to five years, allowing less marketable tree species to take over or meadows to form.

"If a young ash forest is burned and killed and we can't resow it, then it is lost," Bassett said.

The changing landscape has major implications for Australia's diverse wildlife. The fires in Eungella National Park, for example, threaten "frogs and reptiles that don't live anywhere else," said University of Queensland ecologist Diana Fisher.

Fires typically burn through the forest in a patchwork pattern, leaving unburned refuges from which plant and animal species can spread. However, megafires are consuming everything in their path and leaving little room for that kind of recovery, said Griffith University's Kitching.

In both Australia and western North America, climate experts say, fires will continue burning with increased frequency as warming temperatures and drier weather transform ecosystems.

The catastrophic scale of blazes in so many places offers the "clearest signal yet" that climate change is driving fire activity,

said Leroy Westerling, a fire science professor at the University of Alberta.

"It's in Canada, California, Greece, Portugal, Australia," Westerling said. "This portends what we can expect — a new reality. I prefer not to use the term 'new normal'... This is more like a downward spiral."

Forests can shift locations over time. However, that typically unfolds over thousands of years, not the decades over which the climate has been warming.

Most of the nearly 25,000 square miles that have burned in Victoria and New South Wales has been forest, according to scientists in New South Wales and the Victorian government.

By comparison, an average of about 1,600 square miles of forest burned annually in Australia dating to 2002, according to data compiled by NASA research scientist Niels Andela and University of Maryland research professor Louis Giglio.

Unlike grasslands, which see the vast majority of Australia's huge annual wildfire damage, forests are unable to regenerate in a couple of years. "For forests, we're talking about decades, particularly in more arid climates," Andela said.

Most forested areas can be expected to eventually regenerate, said Owen Price, a senior research fellow at the University of Wollongong specializing in bushfire risk management. But he said repeated fires will make it more likely that some will become grasslands or open woodlands.

Price and others have started thinking up creative ways to combat the changes, such as installing sprinkler systems in rainforests to help protect them against drought and fire, or shutting down forested areas to all visitors during times of high fire danger to prevent accidental ignitions.

Officials may also need to radically rethink accepted forest management practices, said Pfautsch, the researcher from Western Sydney.

That could involve planting trees in areas where they might not be suitable now but would be in 50 years as climate change progresses.

"We cannot expect species will move 125 miles to reach a cooler climate," said Pfautsch. "It's not looking like there's a reversal trend in any of this. It's only accelerating."