

# Long Hours on the ‘Slime Line’

## Seafood processors key to Alaska’s largest export



Seafood is one of Alaska’s most lucrative natural resources — and with Alaska fishermen bringing in more than half of the country’s poundage, it takes an enormous workforce to bring the product to market. Seafood processors are the largest share of workers in the fishing industry and also the largest group of seasonal workers in the state.

Processors must be physically fit and able to work long and repetitive hours in wet and slippery conditions. Their duties — which require rain gear, gloves, and boots — can include sorting, grading, washing, cutting, or trimming seafood. The work is sometimes by machine, but often by hand.

This job may not be glamorous — it’s often called the “slime line” — but it’s a critical step in a major supply chain.

### A large, mobile workforce

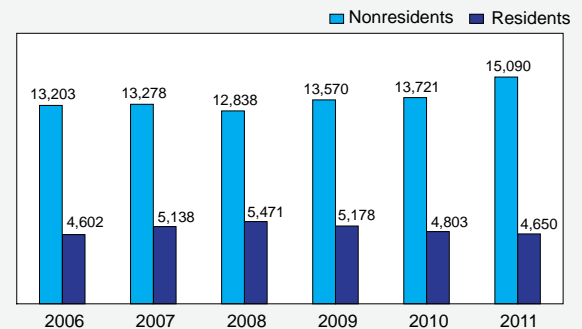
The seafood processing industry provides mostly seasonal jobs wherever there is commercial fishing. The various fisheries span the calendar, and facilities are spread across the state.

Though most salmon species are harvested during the summer only, various shellfish, cod, and bottom fish are harvested throughout the year. The processing industry as a whole employed 25,112 workers statewide in 2011. Of those workers, 19,740 were seafood processors. (See Exhibit 1.)

The areas with the biggest catches also have the highest employment. (See Exhibit 2.) The Aleutians East and Aleutians West census areas and Bristol Bay and Kodiak boroughs each had more than 2,600 processors in 2011. Together, those areas employed 51 percent of the industry’s workers.

The industry relies on widespread recruiting to ensure they will have an adequate number of workers when it’s time to process the fish, and they

### 1 Seafood Processors Alaska, 2006 to 2011



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

hire thousands for short periods of time. To meet the annual need, the largest employers host hiring events across the United States, which means a large pool of new workers each year. During 2011, more than 10,000 seafood processors were new hires, defined as those who didn’t work for their current employer in any of the previous four quarters.

In 2011, 76.4 percent of seafood processors were nonresidents<sup>1</sup> — much higher than any other occupation. In the industry as a whole, 72.8 percent of workers were not Alaska residents.

The rate of nonresident hire varies widely by area, though. In Kodiak Island Borough, 49.3 percent of its 2,822 processors were nonresidents in 2011 — a sharp contrast to 91.6 percent in Aleutians East.

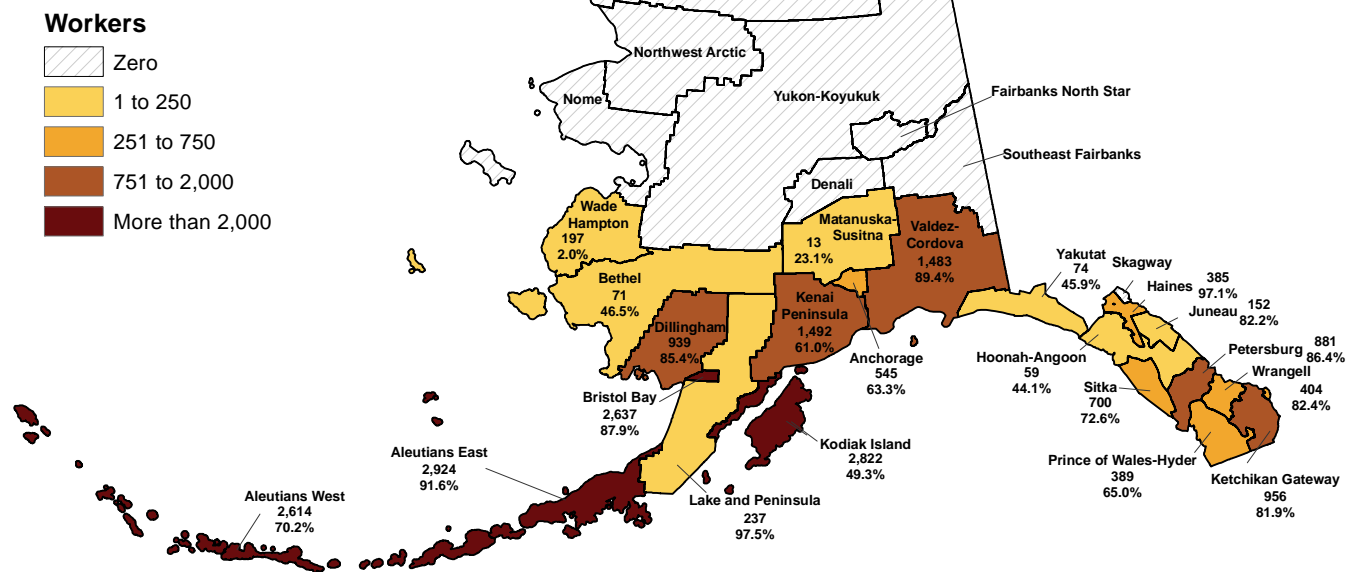
Remote facilities such as those in Aleutians East have a greater need for nonresident workers because there isn’t a large enough pool of locals to fill the jobs. Among workers on large offshore vessels, 98.1 percent of the 1,599 workers were nonresidents.

<sup>1</sup>Residency is determined by a match with the two most recent Permanent Fund Dividend applicant files. Data may not be comparable with the *Nonresidents Working in Alaska* publication due to differences in methodology.

## 2 Where the Seafood Processing Workers Are

Employment and percent nonresident, Alaska, 2011

There were also 1,599 marine/offshore workers, 98.1% nonresident



Notes: The count of workers shown here represents those who worked at any time during 2011. Some may have worked in more than one borough and could be counted more than once. Nome Census Area has three seafood processing plants, but their wages are reported outside the processing industry.  
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

### Onshore and offshore work sites

Alaska has more miles of coastline than the rest of the U.S. combined, and workers process seafood in a variety of land-based facilities, ships, and barges close to the resource.

Shore-based facilities are of two types: canneries, and those producing seafood to be frozen or refrigerated. Statewide, there are 28 canneries and 173 facilities that do not can. A small number of the latter are local butcher shops that also handle fish, but the majority deal exclusively with seafood.

There are also 105 licensed processor vessels in Alaska waters, including floating processors and factory trawlers. Processor vessels receive and process deliveries of salmon and herring. They range in length from just over 100 feet to more than 300 feet, and the largest have crews of several hundred. Many of these vessels are owned by large companies with multiple vessels and shore-based facilities.

The other type, a factory trawler, catches and processes its own fish, targeting just a few species. For example, trawlers are used extensively for pollock, Alaska's largest catch. Alaska harvested about 2.8

billion pounds of pollock in 2011 — more than a quarter of all U.S. landings and more than any other species.

Ships shorter than 65 feet that process their own catch are called direct marketing processors, and they blur the lines between fishermen and processors. The business model behind this emerging trend is to bypass the middle man and sell directly to the market. These vessels, which are often owned by small businesses or independent operators, are typically not captured in the standard economic data because their owners are self-employed. In 2012, 135 direct marketing ships were licensed to process their own catch.

### Pay and benefits vary

Pay varies by year and location, but many new employees make the minimum hourly wage of \$7.75, sometimes with a monetary bonus for completing the season. Processors are expected to work overtime, sometimes logging 12 to 18 hours per day.

It's common for employers to provide room and board — some charge a daily rate, and for some it's

*Continued on page 18*