Alaska first for seasonal job swing

Gap between our winter job low and summer peak is 14%

By DAN ROBINSON

Alaska has about 14 percent more jobs in July than in January, the highest and lowest employment months. That difference is the largest by far among states.

Maine and Montana come closest with a 6 percent seasonal employment difference, and 40 states have seasonality of 4 percent or lower. The two least-seasonal states, California and Vermont, had high-to-low gaps of just under 2 percent in 2024, the most recent full year available.

Seafood processing, construction, tourism are especially seasonal

Nearly all of Alaska's major industries that have seasonal patterns peak during the summer, unlike a few states with busier winter industries. Colorado and Utah, for example, get significant job bumps when their ski resorts open each year.

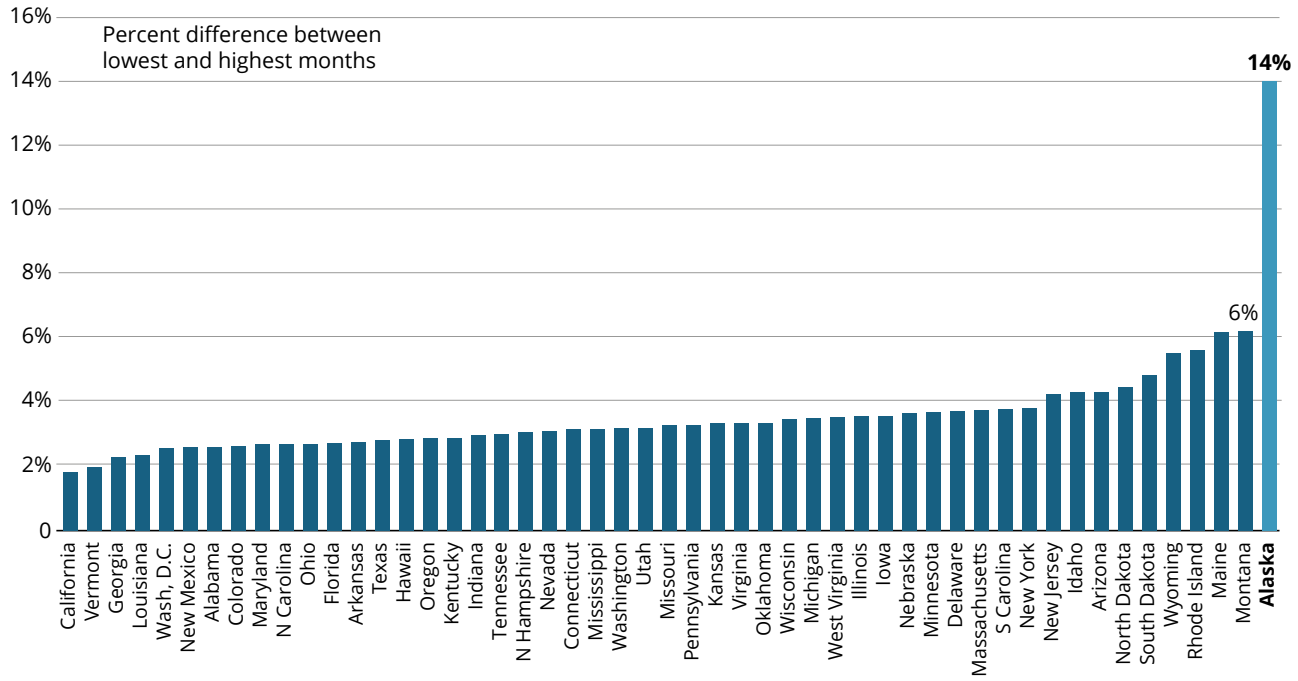
In Alaska, K-12 schools and universities are the seasonal exception: large employers that have less activity in the summer than the rest of the year.

Toward the opposite end is construction's high seasonality, which is probably not surprising in a northern state. August's high point of nearly 21,000 jobs in 2024 was 5,500 jobs above the January lull. Seafood processing's seasonality is Alaska's most extreme, though. The summer peak, July, typically has six to seven times more jobs than the December low.

Oil and gas is not very seasonal

It may seem counterintuitive that Alaska's oil and gas employment patterns are not noticeably

Alaska has the biggest seasonal employment swing of any state by far, 2024



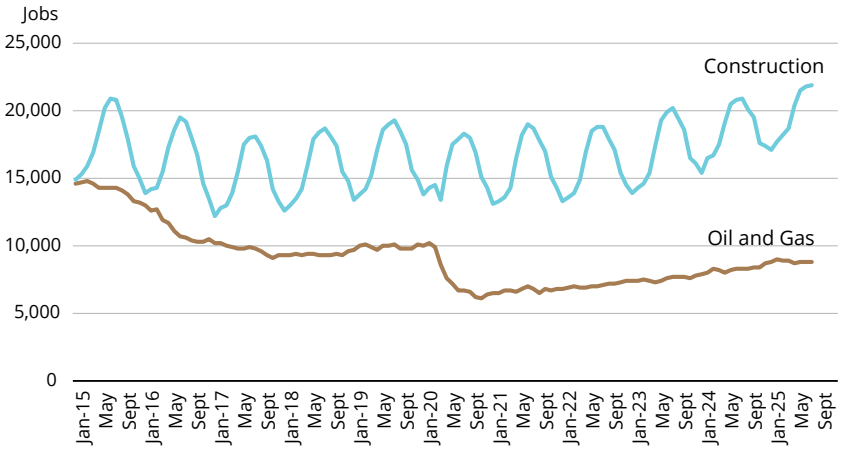
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

seasonal, given that most jobs are well above the Arctic Circle, where darkness and extreme cold are factors. As the exhibit on the right shows, oil and gas employment shows no seasonal pattern, especially compared to the distinctly seasonal swings in construction employment.

While the oil industry isn't seasonal overall, some work can only take place at certain times of the year. For about three months each winter, for instance, ice roads are built to help move the industry's large and heavy equipment. In the summer, activity shifts to drilling, exploration, and building that benefits from warmer weather and much more daylight.

Another reason for the lack of seasonality in oil and gas is that some of its jobs are year-round white-collar positions in Anchorage.

Construction far more seasonal than oil and gas



Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

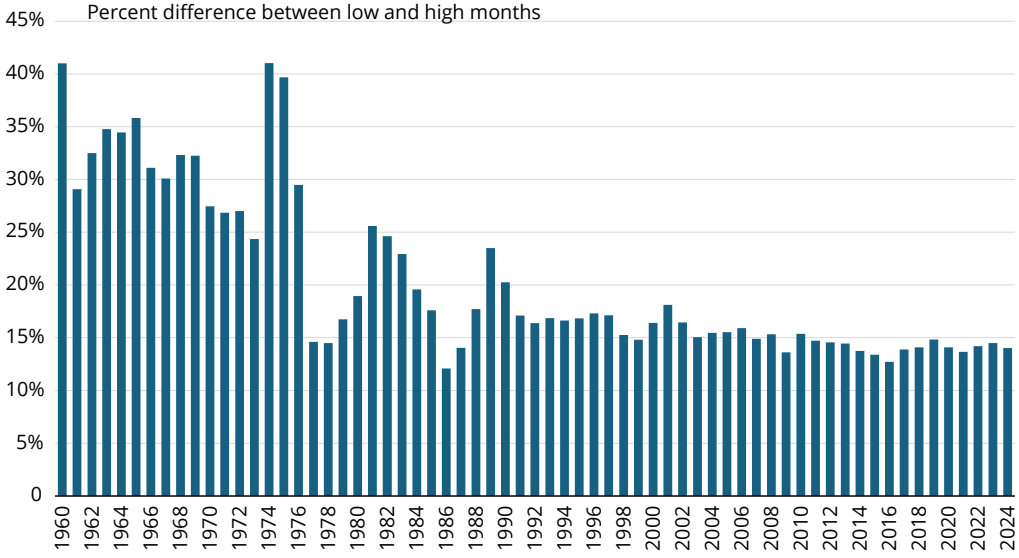
Alaska seasonality has fallen

In the 1960s, Alaska's employment seasonality was more than twice as high as it is now, with summer job peaks about 30 percent higher than winter lows.

Preparing to build the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System juiced summer construction in the mid-1970s and drove seasonality even higher. It dropped way off when pipeline construction was completed, and oil began flowing in the summer of 1977.

After TAPS was complete, seasonal variations in the 1980s were mostly attributable to the ups and downs of construction during a boom-and-bust decade linked to oil and the state's new wealth. Construction had a seasonal high of nearly 27,000 jobs in 1983, but after the state's economy crashed, the peak in 1986 was just a little above 17,000.

Alaska's employment is less seasonal than it used to be



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Since the late 1980s recovery, Alaska's seasonality has trended gently downwards. Part of the explanation is that a growing population stimulated a variety of less seasonal industries such as health care and retail trade.

Drastic differences by area in Alaska

Alaska's overall seasonality, though highest among states, pales in comparison to what some parts of the state experience. Bristol Bay, for example, sees employment soar from about 500 in the depths of winter to more than 3,800 during the July salmon processing peak. (Fish harvesters are not counted in these numbers because they are self-employed.)

The Denali Borough and Skagway are dramatically seasonal because of tourism. Both have summer job numbers nearly four times higher than in January or February.

Fishing, tourism areas are the most seasonal, 2024

Borough or census area	Job peak	Peak month	Job low	Low month	Seasonal difference
Bristol Bay Borough	3,828	July	499	Jan	667%
Denali Borough	3,624	Jun/Jul	919	Jan	294%
Skagway, Municipality	2,122	Aug	550	Feb	286%
Aleutians East Borough	2,610	July	691	Dec	278%
Aleutians West Census Area	4,444	Mar	2,129	Dec	109%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	1,417	June	691	Jan	105%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	1,359	July	692	Nov	96%
Haines Borough	1,408	Aug	766	Feb	84%
Chugach Census Area	4,862	July	2,951	Jan	65%
Copper River Census Area	1,469	Aug	933	Jan	57%
Yakutat, City and Borough	402	Sept	258	Dec	56%
Dillingham Census Area	2,868	July	1,894	Jan/Dec	51%
Sitka, City and Borough	5,749	July	3,916	Jan	47%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	8,836	July	6,216	Jan	42%
Petersburg Borough	1,519	July	1,111	Dec	37%
Kusilvak Census Area	2,240	Oct	1,641	July	37%
Kodiak Island Borough	6,297	July	4,817	Dec	31%
Wrangell, City and Borough	901	July	701	Jan	29%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	2,662	Jun	2,130	Jan	25%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	24,014	June	19,721	Jan	22%
Prince of Wales-Hyder CA	2,386	Aug	1,970	Jan	21%
Juneau, City and Borough	19,750	Aug	16,510	Jan	20%
North Slope Borough	12,683	Dec	11,480	Jan	10%
Northwest Arctic Borough	3,178	Sept	2,883	Jan	10%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	39,844	Aug	36,150	Jan	10%
Nome Census Area	4,175	Oct	3,802	Jan	10%
Bethel Census Area	6,864	June	6,266	Apr	10%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	31,183	Sept	28,480	Jan	9%
Southeast Fairbanks CA	3,336	Jul/Aug	3,128	Jan	7%
Anchorage, Municipality	152,556	Sept	144,019	Jan	6%

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

Anchorage has the smallest seasonal swing, though its 6 percent difference is still large compared to most states. The summer drop in school-related jobs in Anchorage moderates the summer increases in most other sectors.

One of the most unusual patterns for Alaska is in the Kusilvak Census Area in western Alaska, where October is the annual high point, and July is the low. Kusilvak gets very little summer tourism because of its sparse population and limited infrastructure. Subsistence (which these numbers don't reflect), combined with the summer school break, also reduces summer employment.

Implications of high seasonality

Such large seasonal employment swings likely contribute to Alaska also having the nation's largest gross migration rate — the percentage of the population that moves into or out of the state each year. Seafood processing, tourism, and construction bring a lot of people into the state, but many of those workers don't stay, or can't, because they need year-round work.

Of the 400,000-plus people who hold a wage or salary job in Alaska each year, about 20 percent don't stay long enough to establish residency. Many work for just a few months in the summer before returning to their home states.

Employers can hire residents from other states to take seasonal jobs in Alaska with minimal administrative hassle — a benefit to Alaska employers — though travel to and from the state adds cost. To the extent employers hire people from other countries, though, which is common for seafood processors, work visas can be challenging to obtain and create uncertainties from year to year.

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