

On the road to Delta and Tok

Towns on the major highways differ from most of rural Alaska

Area populations and their change over time

Tok

1950	104	—
1960	129	24.0%
1970	214	65.9%
1980	589	175.2%
1990	935	58.7%
2000	1,393	49.0%
2010	1,258	-9.7%
2020	1,243	-1.2%
2024	1,335	7.4%

Delta Junction

1970	703	—
1980	945	34.4%
1990	652	-31.0%
2000	840	28.8%
2010	958	14.0%
2020	918	-4.2%
2024	977	6.4%

Big Delta

1980	285	—
1990	400	40.4%
2000	749	87.3%
2010	591	-21.1%
2020	444	-24.9%
2024	421	-5.2%

Eagle

1900	383	—
1910	178	-53.5%
1920	98	-44.9%
1930	54	-44.9%
1940	73	35.2%
1950	55	-24.7%
1960	92	67.3%
1970	36	-60.9%
1980	110	205.6%
1990	168	52.7%
2000	129	-23.2%
2010	86	-33.3%
2020	83	-3.5%
2024	73	-12.0%

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

By DAVID PHILLIPS and DAVID HOWELL

The drive from the Alaska-Yukon border to Fairbanks is about five hours through rolling hills, river valleys, and other picturesque scenes that define the Interior. Unlike much of rural Alaska, this stretch is tied together by major highways.

Delta Junction formed where the Richardson and Alaska highways meet. The community of Tok was created at the second junction, where the Tok-Cutoff Highway joins the Alaska Highway.

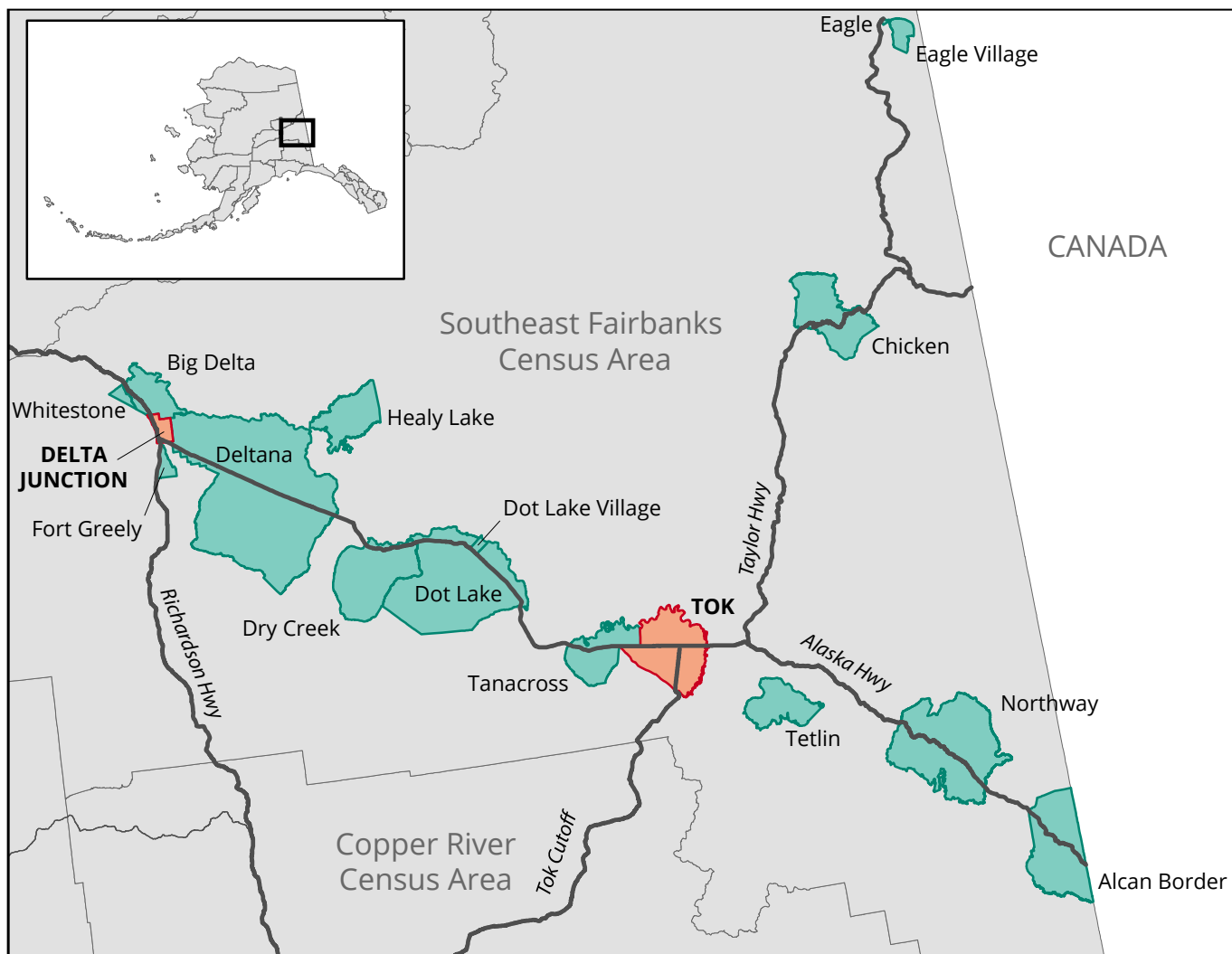
Both towns began as highway construction camps, and their character still reflects that shared history. In a state where most rural places are off the road system, Delta Junction, Tok, and the smaller towns around and between them are organized around travel. They provide services rare in most of Alaska but common across the Lower 48, including gas stations, mechanics, motels, and convenience stores.

The main highways take shape

From Valdez to Fairbanks, the Richardson Highway follows the Valdez-Fairbanks trail and the older Valdez-Eagle trail.



A Caterpillar tractor with a grader widens the road on the Alcan (the Alaska Highway) in 1942. [Photo retrieved from the Library of Congress](#)



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

The latter was established as a route to the Klondike gold fields that bypassed Canada. Construction began in 1899, but the long and arduous trail was seldom used, and the fevered interest in the Klondike soon faded when gold was found elsewhere.

The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail was traveled extensively. As a new gold rush began in Fairbanks, the trail forked northwest to bring supplies into the booming city. This trail, which was initially used by horse-drawn wagons, was completed in 1910. After upgrades, the road was open to motorized traffic in the 1920s.

The more famous of the main highways, the Alaska Highway (often called the Alcan), was built with amazing speed by the Army during World War II to connect Alaska to the Lower 48. Construction began in spring 1942, and by 1943, it was deemed safe for travel.

The third highway, the Tok Cutoff, was completed

in the 1940s to link Tok and Glenallen to the newly completed Glenn Highway. This was the first direct route between Anchorage and the Lower 48. The junction at Tok became a natural stopping point on the way south, fueling Tok's growth.

Delta Junction

The military connection

After the Alcan was completed, the military established a large airfield just outside of Delta Junction. During World War II, the airfield aided the lend-lease program that shipped aircraft to the Soviet Union.

After the war, the airfield became Fort Greely, a cold-weather training location. It was the coldest installation in the country, even below Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks.

Fort Greely began a long decline in the early 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, the military shifted from cold-weather combat training toward a new focus on adversaries in hotter climates.

The base was mothballed, and plans to convert it to a private prison never materialized. The base remained largely shuttered until the Alaska Army National Guard reopened it in 2001 for missile defense.

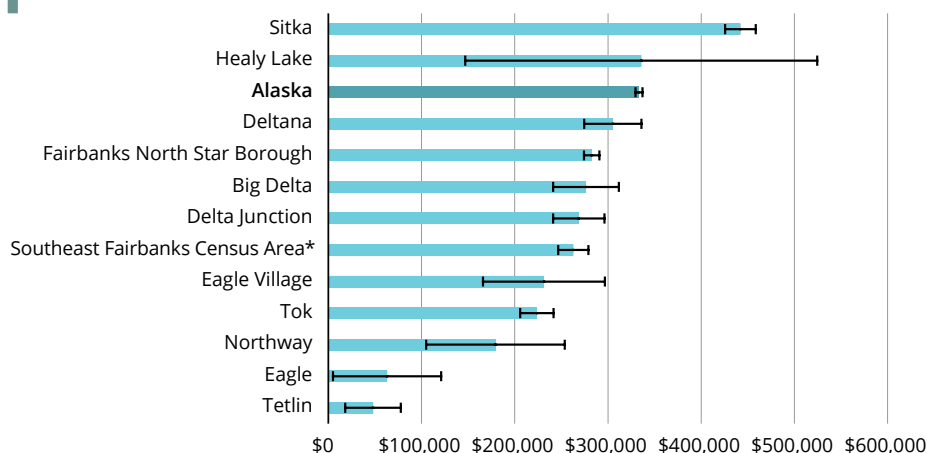
Fort Greely was also the site of Alaska's first — and so far, only — nuclear power plant. The small plant opened in 1962 and ran until 1972. The reactor was a test run for nuclear power in the Arctic, used to power and heat Fort Greely. The project proved too costly, however, and the military plans to dismantle and demolish the plant by 2029.

Farming around Delta

Because the Delta area had an established highway and flat, fertile ground, the state focused on the region in an attempt to diversify Alaska's economy and make it a breadbasket for Alaska and beyond.

With that goal, the state launched the Delta Barley Project in the 1970s. Under this program, the government sold large plots of land and offered loans to convert the land to farms.

5-year median home values surrounding Fairbanks



*For statistical purposes, the entire region is called the Southeast Fairbanks Census Area, a slight misnomer as it covers the land between the Fairbanks North Star Borough and the Canadian border.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Five-Year American Community Survey, 2019-2023

Although barley grows well in this area and the farms flourished initially, inconsistent yields eventually sunk the pilot project. Debt piled up, and many farmers had to sell or walk away.

Although the Delta Barley Project didn't make Alaska an agricultural powerhouse as hoped, it left a legacy. The region is still dotted with farms of all sizes that produce multiple crops and other home-grown products. The Alaska Flour Company is based there, for example, as is the state's only Grade A dairy farm, Alaska Range Dairy. ([See the August issue](#) for the history of the state's dairy industry, which was linked to the Delta Barley Project in the 1970s.)

Tok, the million dollar camp

About 100 miles down the highway to the southeast is Tok, which started as the "Million Dollar Camp," nicknamed for the amount the government spent setting up and maintaining the highway construction camp. Its actual name came later, and its origin remains a subject of debate.

The Dictionary of Alaska Place Names lists Tok as named after the Tokai River, which the U.S. Geological Survey mislabeled as Tok on early maps. The other story is that the original camp was named Tokyo Camp, which was later shortened to Tok.

Today, Tok is nicknamed "The Gateway to Alaska" because it's the first large community Alaska Highway travelers encounter after crossing the border.



This Army jeep was the first truck to travel over the rough corduroy road on the Alcan (the Alaska Highway). Corduroy road is made by placing logs, branches, or boards side by side across a roadway that's swampy or muddy. [Photo retrieved from the Library of Congress](#)

Tok is one of the larger towns in that part of Alaska, and while it's unincorporated, it has the look and feel of a well-established community with a supermarket, a large school, a heated outdoor swimming pool open from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and the main school district offices for the Alaska Gateway School District.

The surrounding areas and the regional economy

Proximity to Fairbanks lowers costs

These rural communities around Fairbanks resemble the Lower 48 more than the other small rural towns in Alaska, in more ways than one. Although the towns are small with limited amenities, residents can drive to Fairbanks to buy products at nonrural Alaska prices.

The area also includes Big Delta, Deltana, and a handful of smaller communities and settlements with colorful histories of their own, including Eagle (see the sidebar on this page), Dot Lake, Tanacross, Chicken, and several others. The map on page 11 shows all the roadside settlements from the Canadian border to Delta Junction.

Because most of rural Alaska has no road access, especially to a city the size of Fairbanks, goods are barged or flown in at a premium.

Eagle in its lawless heyday

Eagle, on the banks of the Yukon River just a few miles from the border, has fewer than 100 residents today but it was a mining and prospecting powerhouse in the early days of the Klondike Gold Rush.

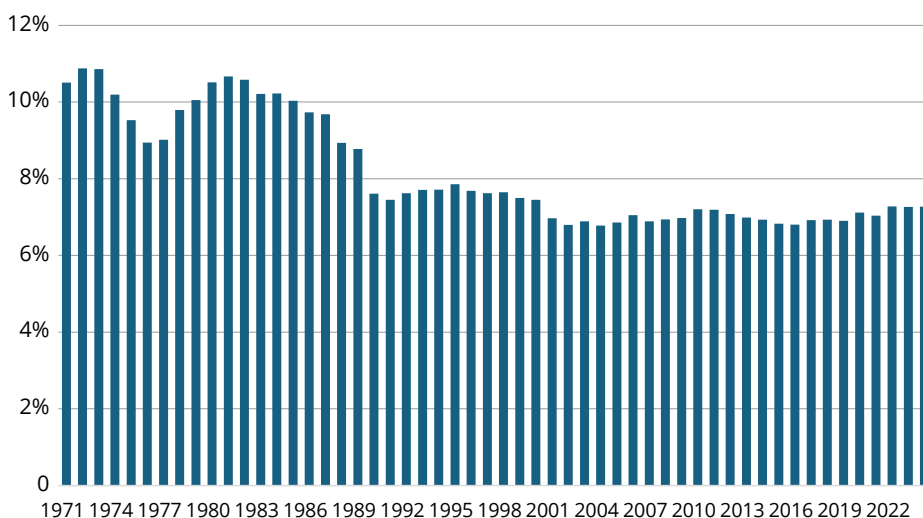
Before Eagle was incorporated in 1901, it was a supply hub for small, independent mining operations. It was also lawless, mostly in the sense that its commerce had no official oversight or legal authority, only informal agreements and ad hoc handling of disputes. That became less sustainable as the population boomed.

The conflicts became so severe that the U.S. military established Fort Egbert nearby and put Eagle under martial law. Judge James Wickersham arrived in 1900 and established a federal courthouse. With that legal authority, Eagle transformed from a crowded, rowdy frontier camp to one of the most law-abiding and well-run communities in the Interior.

Eagle's heyday was short-lived. Just a year after incorporation, the gold rush moved west toward Fairbanks, and so did Judge Wickersham and the court. The population around Fairbanks soared as Eagle's plummeted.

The 1900 Census counted 383 residents in Eagle, although unofficial estimates in 1901 put the population over 1,000. The 2020 Census counted 83 people, and the most recent estimates are even smaller.

Outlying areas' populations as a percentage of Fairbanks



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



This sign marks the end of the Alaska Highway at Mile 1422 in Delta Junction. Photo by Flickr user Jimmy Everson, DVM under [Creative Commons license](#)

Not paying these additional costs greatly lowers the cost of living in communities along the Alaska and Glenn highways.

Land and housing costs are also lower in these communities, as they often are outside cities in the Lower 48. The Southeast Fairbanks Census Area's¹ median home price was \$262,800 in 2024 — \$19,700 less than Fairbanks and \$70,500 less than the statewide sales price.

Gold mining still plays a big role

Much of interior Alaska has a long history of gold mining. Starting with the Klondike Gold Rush in Canada, gold and rumors of gold brought in many settlers. Independent miners set up small claims throughout the area on its many rivers and helped establish many of the communities.

Gold mining still plays a major role in the region's economy, with two large mines currently operating. The Pogo Mine is just north of Delta Junction, and the Manh Choh Mine is right outside of Tok. Together, these mines employ more than 1,000 people.

These mines lift the area's average wage substantially above the statewide average of \$5,935 a month. In 2024, only North Slope workers made more on average, at \$10,575 compared to \$7,655 in the Southeast Fairbanks Census Area.

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