

Volcano halts flights, mail within state

Redoubt takes break

by Alexandra J. McClanahan

Tundra Times publisher

Redoubt Volcano, which erupted back to life Dec. 14 and which has been erupting on and off ever since, grounded thousands of holiday travelers last week and disrupted many shipments of food and merchandise to rural Alaska.

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By press time it appeared that the volcano 52 miles west of Kenai had caused only inconvenience and no major emergencies.

Steve Fish, merchandise manager for the Alaska Commercial Co., said jets flying earlier in the week would take some of pressure off for the 16 AC Co. food stores in Alaska.

Fish said the volcano's activity and the shutdown of flights were causing problems throughout rural Alaska, but that he knew of no emergencies.

One thing that helps, he said, is that inventory levels going into the situation were relatively high in most of the stores. On the other hand, he noted that having shipments slowed the week before Christmas may work a hardship on people who were waiting to buy presents.

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Bud Jepsen, Anchorage branch manager for the Alaska Native Industries Co-operative Association, said ANICA's nearly 40 stores throughout the state faced no serious problems.

And while the volcano caused many inconveniences, "People out in the Bush are pretty resilient," he said.

Cathy Fishel, accounting supervisor for the Arctic Slope Regional Corp. in Barrow, said the fact that flights were halted for several days into and out of Barrow was inconvenient, but not a critical problem.

"We've carried on our business every day," she said.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Postal Service said that on Monday 100,000 pounds of mail was waiting for

transport at the airport office in Anchorage and at some of the air carriers.

But Nancy Cain Schmitt said that backlog was relieved later in the week.

"We're totally dependent on air carriers," she said.

Earlier in the week MarkAir, Alaska Airlines and other passenger carriers curtailed or shut down flights. Northern Air Cargo, an all-cargo carrier for rural Alaska, however, was able to continue almost all of its flights.

At one point early in the week, the Post Office refused all "bypass mail," groceries and other items which go directly from shipper to carrier to customer.

Wilson Hughes, Northern Air Cargo president, explained that his carrier was able to continue service in part because the NAC DC-6s fly more slowly than jets, giving the pilots more time to react to and avoid dust clouds,

and because the aircraft have piston-driven engines as opposed to turbine or jet engines, which are more susceptible to the volcano's highly corrosive dust.

Hughes said it's also much easier for a cargo company to keep a loaded plane ready to go at a moment's notice.

NAC offers about 15 flights daily throughout Alaska, and one flight could include a hub such as Bethel as well as stops in outlying villages such as Aniak and St. Marys.

Hughes said NAC employees were committed to working Christmas Day if necessary to get food and supplies into Alaska villages.

"You look at the cargo, it's not building materials, it's groceries, Christmas trees, presents, turkey,

hams — things they need now," he said.

Lou Cancelmi, a spokesman for Alaska Airlines, said over the Dec. 15-17 weekend, the carrier cancelled at least 120 flights.

But he said the company was able to get aircraft flying early in the week, with the hope of catching up before Christmas Day.

Cancelmi said, however, that everything depends on what activity is taking place at the volcano.

"This is a minute-by-minute situation," he said.

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By Thursday, Cancelmi said Alaska Airlines flights within Alaska were generally back to normal, but that more than 1,000 stand-by passengers were still waiting in the Anchorage airport to get on flights to Seattle.

Throughout last week, Alaska Airlines added 12 extra flights to try to accommodate the backlog, he said.