

Alaska volcano erupts; island residents evacuated - Sun Jul 13, 2008 3:14am EDT

ANCHORAGE, Alaska, July 12 (Reuters) - A volcano in Alaska's Aleutian chain erupted on Saturday, sending a cloud of ash 35,000 feet (10.7 kilometres) into the air and prompting the evacuation of the 10 people who live on the eastern side of the island, officials said.

Okmok Volcano, located on Umnak Island, had an explosive eruption that started just before noon and was continuing through Saturday night, reported the Alaska Volcano Observatory, the joint state-federal agency that monitors Alaska's volcanoes.

The volcano rises to 3,520 feet (1,073-metre) and is located about 65 miles (105 kilometres) southwest of Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, a major fishing port with 4,300 full-time residents, and about 900 miles (1,450 kilometres) southwest of Anchorage.

Shortly after the eruption, the residents of the island's cattle ranch, located close to the volcano, placed a call seeking evacuation, the U.S. Coast Guard said. A fishing vessel took the Umnak residents to Unalaska, the Coast Guard said.

In Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, residents have been showered with a light ashfall, said Jennifer Adleman, a geologist with the Alaska Volcano Observatory.

"There have been reports of eye irritation and people being able to taste it, if you will," Adleman said. "Some folks have seen it on their windshields."

At least two airline flights into Unalaska/Dutch Harbor were canceled and advisories have been sent out to aircraft pilots and mariners, Adleman said.

Okmok Volcano is highly active, with about 16 eruptions occurring every 10 to 20 years since

1805, she said. The last eruption was in 1997, an event that produced ash clouds and a lava flow that traveled five miles across the volcano's caldera floor, she said.

There is a small Aleut village, Nikolski, that is also located on the other side of Umnak Island. That village of about 40 people is to the west of Okmok Volcano and out of the southeasterly path of the ash cloud. (Editing by Daisuke Wakabayashi and Bill Trott)