

We're can't be silent on subsistence

by Eileen MacLean
for the Tundra Times

I want to commend the Alaska Federation of Natives for bringing Natives from all over the state together for its annual meeting in Anchorage to discuss many important topics.

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

OPINION

The conference further solidified relationships and renewed our vigor to work on crucial issues affecting Alaska Natives, especially our fight for a resolution of the subsistence dilemma.

To those of us who derive most of our nourishment from the land, subsistence embraces our whole way of living. It describes the unique hunting and fishing rights we enjoy in order to live.

It encompasses the way of our ancestors who taught us to respect the environment and its inhabitants. It involves cultural values and attitudes: mutual respect, sharing and resourcefulness.

We must show our strength to those legislators who do not support our way of life! Alaska Natives must seek a responsible state and federal government. The state government is not responding to the subsistence issue.

We do have the right to voice our concerns, and in order to make state and federal government respond to our issues we must have active participation in the election process.

The failure of the House to pass a constitutional amendment that would have allowed a preference for subsistence uses by rural residents — while not precluding subsistence uses by residents in non-rural areas — will affect all of our lives.

Federal management will cost \$15 million — money that will likely be taken from other worthwhile federal projects for Alaska — and will likely be as poor as it was prior to statehood.

The Federal Subsistence Board is comprised of federal bureaucrats who will be less sensitive to Alaska needs and more prone to succumbing to out-



side interests.

Although the federal government under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act is mandated to protect subsistence hunting and fishing on federal lands, dual management of fish and wildlife in Alaska will definitely cause confusion that in my view will lead to more restricted hunts involving cumbersome paperwork to qualify, thus more regulation of people's lives.

We will need to be attentive to regulatory changes made by federal and state agencies. The federal regulations, effective since July 1, roughly resemble the state's subsistence law that existed prior to the court case that found it unconstitutional.

However, we have already seen disturbing diversions from the state's determination of "rural" and "non-rural."

Federal regulations appear more restrictive, as evidenced by the recent proposal by the federal subsistence advisory commission to declare Kodiak, Sitka and the village of Saxman "non-rural," contrary to the state's determination for these areas.

The Federal Subsistence Board fails to see that subsistence is a part of the character of these communities — it's not something you can take away or grant! This is not a final decision, and the commission is currently taking public input, so we must all submit comments to the board protecting this determination.

The federal commission has pro-

Although the subsistence board still would possess virtual veto power over all fish and game management on two-thirds of the state, this would empower Native corporations and give us more control over the resources our people so depend on.

bably never even been to most, if not all, of these communities!

Even more disturbing for the future is the federal government's acknowledgement that communities are dynamic in nature; that is, they can change with time so that what was "rural" in 1980 may not necessarily be so now. What is "rural" now may not be determined to have a subsistence priority 10 years in the future, with continued federal management.

This continues to threaten our subsistence lifestyle. Some rural communities today may not always be protected under federal management.

I predict that as federal management continues, we will see more federal lands closed to non-subsistence uses, especially park lands. Sports hunters will see their opportunities restricted, with more limitations on federal lands as well as state lands in Alaska.

Evidence of this is the decision by the Alaska Boards of Fisheries and Game at their meeting in Fairbanks recently that all Alaskans are eligible for subsistence uses on state lands. Since everyone in the state could now be eligible for all hunts on state land, sports and commercial uses may be limited in some cases to provide enough fish and game to go around.

Those who fought so vehemently against subsistence and rural preference will be big supporters of a constitutional amendment in years to come to return management of fish and game on federal lands back to the

state.

I think it's important for Alaska Native corporations and organizations to work closely with the federal government, to possibly contract with the Federal Subsistence Board for regulation of fish and game.

Although the subsistence board still would possess virtual veto power over all fish and game management on two-thirds of the state, this would empower Native corporations and give us more control over the resources our people so depend on.

In addition, we need to work on broadening our constituency, to tap in to non-Native rural voters. Nobody has organized rural non-Natives nor is any organization acting on their behalf, and yet they comprise more than 20 percent of the population.

If non-Native rural voters had been galvanized into action during the legislative and special session, perhaps those legislators who have a substantial non-Native rural constituency in their district would have been pressured into voting for a constitutional amendment.

Finally, we need to continue to meet in the forum that AFN provides. Such conferences help us to become more unified in our efforts at a very crucial time.

I encourage all subsistence supporters to be vocal in protecting this way of life. We cannot afford to be silent on this issue.