

# St. George fights for economic future

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

Tundra Times

St. George of ancient times was a fighter, a dragon slayer and winner of great battles.

The people of the island which bears his name must be no less the fighters to face the task in front of them — building a sound economic base and taking control of their lives after virtually a century of servitude.

Flore Lekanof, president of the St. George Tannaq Co., the for-profit company of one of the tiny islands in the Pribilof Islands feels the people of his island are up to the task.

Lekanof and others of the St. George Company have been negotiating for years to see the U.S. government loosen its ties from the island but without leaving islanders afloat economically.

The U.S. House of Representatives three weeks ago approved a bill that would end federal control of most aspects of the island life. The bill also would grant a one-time \$20 million payment to the Pribilofs. That money would be administered by a non-profit corporation to be formed.

The U.S. Senate has not yet voted on the bill but the budget-cutting-minded Senate is not expected to oppose ending federal subsidies for the Pribilofs.

The big question and one which is answered with a resounding "no" from most people is 'can \$20 million put the Pribilofs on a sound financial footing?'

'No' from Alaska Liaison to Washington D.C. John Katz and 'No' from Lekanof who

(Continued on Page Twenty-Four)

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(Continued from Page One)

has been fighting for the rights of the Pribilofians for decades.

"\$20 million is a mere spit in the ocean compared to the hurt that has been imposed on the people of the Pribilofs by the federal government over the years," says Lekanof.

The seal fur industry has fallen on hard times with the rise of national movement against killing of wild animals for use as ornamental fur coats.

The industry lost money under federal rule, says Lekanof, who doesn't expect that a privately ruled fur seal business would do any better.

He is looking toward a fishing industry but says the islands need massive help to get such an industry going.

Neither St. George nor neighboring St. Paul has a harbor deep enough for fishing boats. The island representatives now are trying to obtain state funding to build harbors on both islands while using federal money to help develop the bottomfish industry in other ways.

Gov. Bill Sheffield has included a \$10.4 million item in his capital budget for this year, but because of legislative battles over Sheffield cabinet appointments, no action has been taken on that budget.

Sheffield aide John Greeley said last week that the Legislature is expected to act on the budget sometime before its June 23 adjournment. Greeley said he doesn't know what the prospects are for passage of the bill.

And, he acknowledges that \$10.4 million isn't enough to build harbors in both or even

one of the islands.

Lekanof estimates that a completed harbor in St. George will cost \$14 million and about \$35 million in St. Paul.

And, he is insistent on both the state and federal governments continuing to help the island develop.

For the federal government's responsibility, he says "The (Cherokee) Trail of Tears from North Carolina to Oklahoma was nothing compared to the treatment of the Pribilofs. The Pribilofs makes the (forced march of half the Cherokee nation across the country) look silly if the two were put together."

As for the State of Alaska, Lekanof is quick to criticize state leaders who warned the federal government that state funds wouldn't cover the federal pull-out.

Alaska liaison John Katz told Congressional leaders that the Pribilofs would have to contend for money and services with the rest of the state.

Lekanof points out that the state has provided little if anything since Alaska statehood because the federal government has provided all services.

The state can't forget the Pribilofs, he says and adds "We're just as much citizens of the state as anyone else."

Some aspects of the federal bill may be changed, said Lekanof who doesn't want one non-profit corporation clause of the bill to stand as is.

He feels that each island should manage its own economic fate independent of St. Paul, and asks the question, "Would Wrangell and Kodiak be expected to join for the

same economic development? I look at us (St. George and St. Paul) as having a friendly feud."

St. George has already formed a business partnership with a Japanese firm to develop bottomfishing in the area and is looking to other business ventures, says Lekanof.

One of those forms of business is learning to capitalize on the growing offshore oil industry which is eyeing the waters surrounding the Pribilofs as a source of jobs and revenue.

With a harbor, St. George could become a staging base for oil rig support boats.

Lekanof is aware of the delicate balance that must be struck between the traditional subsistence lifestyle of fishing and the new job-producing oil industry.

Bottomfish harvesting is "just as important an industry as coal," he says but he is quick to say "we have hidden our head in the sand too long. Oil is not just important for Alaska but for the entire country."

His attitude seems to be one of "if oil development must occur, St. George should do all it can to reap the benefits instead of just the negatives."

He is aware that oil development in the area could have harmful benefits on the lifestyle of the St. George people. "There will be abrupt change, it's inevitable."

But, he "welcomes the oil industry with reservations because I do want to protect subsistence. But at the same time we must recognize progress."

"We intend to fully partici-

pate in the (oil) business providing services and using local labor," not unlike the use of local labor from Mexico, said Lekanof.

He predicts that "we will slowly get to the point where oil and fishing industry could live together."

He says he is aware of the potential for oil spill damage and says "everything humanly possible will be done to prevent a spill but we can't predict earthquakes. We will never get progress if we sit fearful of what is to come."

To fully participate in any business, people everywhere need good, solid educations, said Lekanof whose training is as a teacher.

A formal education is a must for everybody, he says and he says education leads to jobs. "Without jobs you have mischief and trouble. With jobs you have improved status and no trouble."

He says that the education isn't always that of a classroom kind. "How else could we people have survived all in the past?"

He does not rule out the possibility that more federal aid might be sought by the islanders to develop some form of non-seal-dependent industry on the islands.

Lekanof can remember the harm done to his islanders well. He was instrumental in getting the harsh light of the public eye to shine on conditions in the Pribilofs under federal rule.

The Pribilofs were under one form of rule or another since the days of Russian domination but, says Lekanof, the U.S. Government was by far the harshest of the rulers.

At least when the islands were run by trading companies the companies allowed a little wine, some extra food for the islanders, says Lekanof.

When the federal government stepped in islanders were not allowed to leave the islands or return once they had left. They weren't allowed the one bottle of wine a week that has been allowed by the traders; they were poorly fed, underpaid and kept in freezing, substandard dwellings.

In the 1960s Tundra Times founder and Editor Howard Rock and reporter Tom Snapp did a series of articles on the conditions on the islands and brought a U.S. investigative commission to investigate the claims.

When that commission stated that the conditions on the island weren't that bad, Lekanof, then a teacher in Kotzebue, called Rock and convinced him to look again.

As a result of that call more research was done and a report issued condemning federal treatment of the Pribilofs.

The federal government has since then subsidized the annual seal harvest to allow some form of economy to continue on the islands but the islands must change their financial base, says Lekanof.

