

AFN Bush Justice Conference in Bethel Nov. 20-22

by **Jim Benedetto**

Tundra Times Editor

The Alaska Federation of Natives is holding a Bush Justice Conference in Bethel this week, Nov. 20-22. Some of the topics to be dealt with during the conference are Native inmate concerns, rehabilitation, the Indian Child Welfare Act, problems in providing state judicial services to bush residents, rural Alaska policing, Fish and Game enforcement, and victims' rights.

The purpose of the conference, the third event of its type held by AFN, is to address the special problems and concerns of Native and rural residents of Alaska's bush. With no road system to reach many Alaskan communities, providing reasonable legal advice for people in trouble can be extremely difficult. Compounding the problem is the fiscal crunch; with the State of Alaska's oil revenues decreasing, programs like Alaska Legal Services face shortfalls and closures in many locales.

Perhaps because of the difficulty in providing adequate legal advice to bush dwellers, those attending the con-

ference will be reminded that the proportion of Alaska Natives in correctional institutions far exceeds the portion they make up in the state's population. Once in such a facility, many Natives have problems in adjusting to prison life. A Native inmate in a typical Alaskan jail may be 1500 miles or more from his community, thereby depriving him of the support his family and friends might have otherwise provided if visits were more convenient. The conference participants will also be informed of the great progress that Native culture councils in various institutions have made. They provide Native inmates with a renaissance of traditional values, grounding them in their cultures and reminding them of their proud heritage. Counselors work closely with some of the culture councils, in order to capitalize on rehabilitation opportunities.

Overcrowding in the state's prisons and other problems will be dealt with at the conference, with many experts expected to make recommendations to reform different aspects of the system.

The participation by the state and local communities has been good in

past conferences, according to Janie Leask, President of AFN.

"Recommendations that came out of past conferences have been favorably received," said Leask, adding that, "that's why we are so excited about holding this conference this year."

Leask gave high marks to Department of Corrections Commissioner Roger Endell. "Commissioner Endell has been very cooperative," said Leask. Endell will address the conference during its first day.

The AFN Bush Justice Conference is being coordinated by Julie Kitka, special assistant to Janie Leask.