

Problems with speech

As is often the case in political speeches, the "best" or, in this case, most interesting, was saved for last in Gov. Jay Hammond's "State of the State" address last week.

After giving himself near perfect marks for performance of a governor in Alaska in the late 70s, Hammond spoke of the issue which has the capacity to tear this state apart in the 80s — subsistence.

Without placing himself on either side of the issue, Hammond said he didn't think the attempt to repeal the subsistence statute is a good idea because it will not provide any access to the state's fish and game resources to the needy, and because it would invite federal intervention.

In other words, if the state subsistence statute is removed, the feds will come in and enforce a subsistence priority on federal land.

Then the goernor went on to say that the law ought to be amended to provide that only the needy have a chance to take fish or game on a subsistence basis.

That sounds good to someone living in Anchorage on a very low income but to the people in the state who have been brought up living a style of life dependent on hunting and fishing for their physical, as well as cultural well-being, that suggestion doesn't wash.

There are many good things to say about letting the needy in the state have access to fish and game but there are provisions for that now. What the subsistence statute recognizes is that there are some people who live a life more dependent upon and centered on things other than watching Monday Night Football and going to movies and driving up and down drag-strip-like streets on Saturday night.

His suggestion also doesn't recognize that there are many areas in the state that are close to subsistence users but not close to large masses of the state's needy.

But then his suggestion doesn't recognize many things such as what would the economic criteria be and how would a new need-based system be handled.

The statute as is provides a lifestyle for the people who have lived with, used as needed, and respected the land for untold generations, long before western man came to Alaska to fence the land and claim title to bits and pieces of it.

Hammond, it has been pointed out repeatedly, did not propose an actual amendment to the law, nor did he come up with a proposed economic basis for his suggestion. All he did was talk at length about a suggestion that should be forgotten because it is so impractical and vague.

Unfortunately, that suggestion probably will be seized upon by anti-subsistence advocates who will quote only the part about the need criteria. Then, without mentioning that Hammond foresees numerous perils in repeal of the statute, they will argue that even the state's governor supports change in the law.

And for this reason, the Native peoples of Alaska must educate themselves and others on the issue of subsistence. Even Hammond said that public education is necessary. That we all agree upon.