

Subsistence issue divides Fish and Game

The Associated Press

Gov. Jay Hammond is expected to meet this week with Fish and Game Commissioner Ron Skoog to discuss a widening revolt in the Division of Game over state-backed efforts to retain the state's subsistence priority law.

While Hammond has made it clear that his administration opposes repeal of the statute giving rural residents a priority to fish and game ... more than 30 department of fish and

game employees are asking for time off to work for the law's repeal.

The group is headed by Game Division Director Ron Sommerville and now includes regional supervisors Sterling Eide of Anchorage and Richard Bishop of Fairbanks.

The widening rift in the department pits biologists who think the agency should stick to management against those who believe biologists should jump into the wildlife allocation battle.

Some fear that taking sides could undermine biological arguments for protecting fish and game stocks.

Says subsistence division director Dennis Kelso, "I guess it raises the question of whether the biological expertise is really objective, or not."

But Sommerville scoffs at the warnings that the fray could undermine the department's credibility.

As he puts it, "Fish and game is 90 percent politics, no matter how you cut it any-

way."

He says he believes fish and game managers have a professional responsibility to tell Alaskans that the existing subsistence law based on residency is wrong.

Hammond press secretary Chuck Kleeschulte says the governor is, in his words, "extremely disappointed."

He is expected to meet this week with Skoog, who has received a petition from 35 fish and game employees who are asking him to reverse the de-

partment's official support of the subsistence laws.

Voters will decide on November 2nd whether to repeal the subsistence law and replace it with the anti-discrimination hunting, fishing and trapping rights act.

Hammond says the new law would trigger a federal takeover of subsistence management on federal lands, and hamstringing the state's ability to implement any subsistence regulations.