

# Struggle continues to limit Beaufort seismic testing

The North Slope Borough and the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission have been locked in a struggle to stop the federal government from allowing seismic tests in the Beaufort Sea during critical bowhead whale migration months.

The conflict began this fall when the Borough learned that six seismic testing ships were operating in the Beaufort Sea during August and September, a time when the bowheads are migrating south.

The state yielded to North Slope pressure at that time and revoked seismic testing permits for Alaskan waters. The United States Geological Survey, on the other hand, limited but did not stop testing in federal waters. The U.S.G.S. allowed the testing to continue despite a National Marine Fisheries Department "letter of clarification" which warned that those issuing test permits were open to legal prosecution.

Tensions between the state and the North Slope were escalating over the issue. In a Sept. 25 interview, A.E.W.C. Executive Director Marie Adams said, "We're trying to be reasonable. But if we are backed against the wall we will go to court and let the courts decide this . . . it's getting to that end."

The weather defused the sit-

uation when it grew so inclement that the testing could not continue. Still, the issue of seismic testing during seasonal migrations was unresolved.

Meetings with government officials were scheduled during January in an effort to settle the conflict before another migration season begins and in time for a proposed solution to be presented to the entire A.E.W.C. at its annual meeting in February.

The A.E.W.C. maintains that this fall's seismic tests represent a violation of the whaling agreement it signed with the Department of the Commerce last spring.

According to Adams, that agreement calls for all oil exploration activities that may affect whale migrations to be reported to the A.E.W.C. The National Marine Fisheries Department failed to report this fall's seismic testing and it was only by accident that Borough Science Advisor Dr. Tom Albert first heard about it.

Seismic testing involves bouncing sound waves off the ocean bottom and recording the echo in an attempt to learn more about the ocean floor's geological make-up. Whales communicate through underwater sounds and many fear that the seismic testing may interrupt whale conversations



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or actually damage the whale's hearing.

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Ray Droenenburg of the North Slope Borough Environmental Protection Office, said the federal government had agreed not to conduct such seismic tests during so-called "closed windows" when

whales are migrating through the area.

September should have been a closed window, according to Droenenburg, and the government's actions stood in direct contradiction to their stated policy: