

St. Paul opens \$58 million port

by Soren Wuerth
for the Tundra Times

ST. PAUL — As waves rolling in from the Bering Sea sprayed against St. Paul's recently completed 1,000 foot breakwater, a throng of residents rejoiced with their own splashes of holy water on this Pribilof island's new boat harbor.

The \$58 million port — the result of five years of construction — is an effort to rebuild the island's faltering economy. St. Paul, located 767 miles west of Anchorage, lost its primary source of revenue in 1984 when the federal government prohibited com-

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mercial harvesting of the northern fur seal.

Congress mandated instead that the island's residents, 90 percent of whom are Aleut, devote their energies to alternative resources.

"Everyone felt that developing the fishing industry was what it took," said Vern McCorkle, St. Paul's city manager. "The Army Corps of Engineers had completed reconnaissance studies showing that a har-

bor was feasible."

With funding from the state, Congress and the island's Native corporation, Tanadgusix Corp., two breakwaters were built along with 300 feet of dock and dredging began in a 10-acre moorage basin.

The port is expected to bring in a new tide of income for St. Paul as its strategic location in the Bering Sea is beneficial for vessels eager to refuel, change crews and resupply. Revenue from storage, docking privileges and wharf fees as well as water, fuel and other sales are predicted to total up to

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\$15.6 million.

The island will also try to capitalize on the numerous halibut, bottomfish and other fish in the area.

St. Paul's publically owned Pribilof Island Processors, which processes crab, hopes the harbor will help to expand its business. Japanese owned St. Paul Seafoods Inc., a surimi plant, will begin operation next year and plans to process at least 400 tons of pollack daily, according to SPS Plant Manager Chuck Beach.

But St. Paul residents are staking their claim to an industry that won't be a quick fix for the economy.

Juliana Shane, an administrator for PIP, said the plant, which is currently closed due to "management problems," has trouble getting need machinery quickly.

"When we call people asking for supplies they say, 'St. Paul, where's that?' Sometimes small needles will shut down operation," she said.

McCorkle said the plants need to begin operation soon as the final grant from Congress ends this year and employees will lose their jobs.

"The money for operating city services runs out in December of this year, and that is why the coming on of the crab plant is so very critical," McCorkle said. "If the fishing industry does not develop, it would be very devastating to St. Paul. The city would transfer from one failing species, fur seals, to another, fish.

"Should that happen, there would be another disappointment. There would be no way to earn a living and people would have to leave the island. People really want to live here. This is their home," he said.

Subsistence hunting of fur seals, which has lasted more than a century, continues today in St. Paul, and allowing subsistence use of seals from the federally managed rookeries is negotiated yearly, said McCorkle.

Former Gov. Bill Sheffield, who attended the harbor dedication Aug. 4, said retaining subsistence rights for St. Paul residents should be a priority of state government.

"These people don't have a lot of representation," Sheffield said. "Peo-

ple should be able to enjoy the traditional way of life and at the same time have a job. We need to continue the protection of that environment and create a new environment as well. That's what the boat harbor does."
