

AFN - economy takes spotlight

by David Totten

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The main issue may not be as divisive as last year's debate over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but there are several important topics on the table for the 1996 Alaska Federation of Natives convention in Anchorage.

AFN spokesperson John Tetpon told Anchorage radio station KENI that the economy will be a major topic at this year's convention.

"We're still dealing with economic development in rural Alaska," Tetpon said. "And trying to meet the needs of the people out there in terms of providing enough of an economy so that they don't have to depend on welfare."

Tetpon does not expect another divisive debate, although because the AFN is made of membership organizations from across the state, he pointed out that each member voices its own philosophy.

"I don't think that this year, we'll have an issue like we had with ANWR," Tetpon said. "I think that's behind us, but you never know what the convention will bring."

Tetpon said the AFN is united on the subsistence issue.

"Our membership has agreed that there are some things in the subsistence arena that we will not compromise," Tetpon said. "We will not move away from a rural preference and we will not agree to losing any of the things that we have won in the courts. We will not give up on those."

A panel discussion entitled "Does one way of life have to die so another can live? Protecting our subsistence way of life," is scheduled for 1:15 p.m. on Tuesday.

Tetpon said the defining issue will be a draft of legislation called the Alaska Native Omnibus Bill. On Wednesday, at 3:30 p.m., Alaska's congressional delegation holds a hearing on the bill. The bill

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deals with recommendations made by the Native Commission report.

"We'll be dealing with three items," Tetpon said. "One of those is the alcohol limitation and control. Another is families and children and another is building an economic base in rural Alaska. (The Native Commission report) came out in '94 and it recommended that the Native community as a whole take more control of its own destiny, self-governance (and) economic development."

AFN President, Julie Kitka said it is important to keep the findings of the commission fresh in the public's mind.