

Groups continue effort to halt Chukchi drilling

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

Trustees for Alaska, an environmental law firm representing Eskimo walrus hunters, last week presented oral arguments to the Ninth Circuit Court in San Francisco in an attempt to stop oil drilling in the Chukchi Sea to protect the walrus population.

Earlier, the Interior Department denied a petition by Trustees, the Eskimo Walrus Commission and the

Rural Alaska Resources Association to stop oil drilling off Alaska's Outer Continental Shelf to protect walrus in early August. A decision by the Ninth Circuit is expected to be made within the next few weeks.

Shell Western Exploration and Production Inc. is the only company exploring for oil on Alaska's Outer Continental Shelf at this time, and groups claim the company is doing it without

continued on page twelve

• Groups oppose drilling

continued from page one

the proper permits to make it legal.

"Companies are allowed to take small numbers of marine mammals 'incidental' to their oil development activities after they submit to a permitting process that imposes strict monitoring and requires a determination by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife that such takings will only have a 'negligible impact' on a marine mammal species," according to a statement released by Trustees for Alaska in early August.

Sharon Sturges, staff attorney for Trustees for Alaska in Anchorage, said that Shell Western's drilling operations are displacing walrus in the Chukchi Sea.

This type of displacement to the walrus could be a threat to Alaska Natives' subsistence hunting success. Also, the walrus must be protected because Eskimos have relied on walrus meat for nutrition and survival for hundreds of years.

Sturges said the word "taken" can mean harassment, capture or killing of the mammal by the drilling company.

"It doesn't have to be violent or bloody. You don't have to actually kill at all to be considered as 'taking,'" Sturges said.

"Also this type of marine mammal violation isn't covered vastly in the media because the animals aren't just being killed," she said about the walrus displacement.

Ben Nageak, commissioner of the Eskimo Walrus Commission in Barrow, said their involvement with the lawsuit has to do with the well-being of the walrus, since walrus meat is an important source of food.

"We depend a lot on walrus for food and we use the tusks to make crafts," Nageak said.

Nageak said not only is it companies exploring for oil which could threaten Eskimos' hunting rights, it's animal rights groups.

Since the international ban on elephant ivory Alaska Natives are getting a lot of pressure for using walrus ivory. He said some groups want walrus hunting stopped altogether.

The Eskimo Walrus Commission was established to protect walrus and work with other concerned groups to ensure the well-being of walrus.

The walrus population is estimated to be at about 240,000.

"If a person in a village found a dead walrus with its head and body intact, they'd chop the head and oosik off and maybe use the rest of the walrus to feed their dogs," he explained.

"We don't like the activity of outside forces trying to put restrictions on our walrus activities. It's not our fault it has a secondary value."

He said some animal rights groups will pin-point a group, such as Eskimo walrus hunters, and tell the rest of the world that Eskimos kill the walrus for their monetary value.

He said these groups make a lot of money from these fictitious campaigns and hunting walrus gets more restricted each year, simply because of lies.

"We realize there are some bad apples out there, but I want people to know that 99.9 percent of our people take walrus for food. And, of course, we are taught at a young age not to waste," he said.

"History shows that walrus were used to make fish hooks, sled runners, and the skin was used for boats. Plus it's a delicacy."

"They're not telling people the truth. We're not head-hunters, so why should we suffer for that?" Nageak asked.

The groups involved in the case say



the oil drilling not only displaces the walrus but it is also a clash of interests to have oil drilling in the Chukchi Sea.

The Outer Continental Shelf of

Alaska is one of the few offshore areas not declared off limits to oil development by President Bush over a month ago.