

We will overcome subsistence dilemma

OPINION

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

by Eileen Panigeo MacLean
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — The Legislature adjourned its two-week-old special session after failing for the second time to pass legislation that would have allowed Alaska voters the chance to keep fish and wildlife management in the hands of the state and out of the hands of the federal government.

The legislation failed because 14 House Republicans adamantly opposed amending the Alaska Constitution. They preferred trying to address the problem by making statutory changes and by having the state join in a lawsuit that challenges Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

ANILCA was designed to protect the subsistence lifestyle for rural residents. The Alaska Outdoors Council, urban hunters, urban fishermen and others have filed a lawsuit challenging the section of ANILCA that provides a subsistence hunting and fishing preference for rural Alaskans.

After numerous legislative hearings, however, it was strongly argued that a statutory change and a legal challenge to ANILCA would not succeed in solving the subsistence dilemma. Although the testimony convinced a majority of us in the House, it did not succeed in convincing enough legislators to support a constitutional change.

As a result, this important matter has been taken out of the hands of the people to decide. Alaska voters have been denied the opportunity of deciding whether they want more government control in their lives.

The state will not be able to come into compliance with federal law for over two years — until the next legislature passes a measure for the 1992 General Election.

There will be federal management of fish and wildlife over two-thirds of Alaska. The exact extent of federal authority will likely be the subject of much litigation.

Federal management will likely be as poor as it was prior to statehood. The Federal Subsistence Board will be

comprised of federal bureaucrats who will be less sensitive to Alaska needs and more prone to succumbing to Outside interests.

Federal management will cost \$15 million — money that will likely be taken from other worthwhile federal projects for Alaska.

Already, the state has lost \$1 million in federal funding for subsistence regional councils.

Alaska residents will lose hunting and fishing opportunities currently provided by the state — such as ready access to public lands. The state will be forced to enact a complex and expensive system for determining who receives a subsistence priority on state lands.

The measure the House failed to pass would have allowed a preference for subsistence uses by rural residents while not precluding subsistence uses by residents in non-rural areas. It would have re-instated current state subsistence law. It would have allowed state compliance with federal law.

Finally, it would have allowed Alaska voters to decide the fate of subsistence.

Naturally, I was deeply disappointed by the House vote.

Although many urban legislators have come to realize that this is as much a non-Native issue as it is a Native issue, many sports hunters and sports fishermen fail to see how much they will lose should federal takeover continue.

So the question now is, where do we go from here?

Rest assured, subsistence hunting and fishing will still be protected on both federal and state lands. We will merely see different agencies involved in fish and wildlife management than we saw under the old system.

We will still need to be attentive to regulatory changes made by federal and state agencies. The federal regulations, effective since July 1, roughly resemble the state's subsistence law that existed prior to the court case that found it unconstitutional.

This is likely to change, however. The head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has predicted that the federal regulations will probably become more restrictive. Just what this means still remains to be seen. To date, no public hearing addressing new regulations has been announced.

The Alaska Board of Game has an enormous task on its hands now that everyone in Alaska can be considered a subsistence hunter. How the board will address this increase in the number of persons considered as subsistence hunters will be seen at its July 23-29 emergency meeting in Anchorage at the Anchorage International Airport Inn.

I strongly recommend that every rural Alaska resident carefully monitor the outcome of this important meeting.

Rural Alaskans have faced and met many challenges in the past. Today's current subsistence dilemma is but another chapter in our struggle for survival. As with past struggles, we shall overcome it and continue to move forward.