

Watt: I'll uphold oath to subsistence law

By LINDA LORD-JENKINS

Tundra Times

James Watt this week told a group of reporters that he has a "statutory duty to enforce (federal laws concerning subsistence provisions in Alaska) and of course will honor that," if Initiative 7 passes in the November election.

Initiative 7, if approved, would repeal the Alaska subsistence provision approved in 1978 which gives priority to subsistence fish and game users.

The initiative would require that no group of people, no matter what their circumstances, would have any priority

for fish and game use.

Another provision for subsistence priority is included in the federal Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act which states that subsistence shall be provided for on federal lands.

The Department of Interior has had spokesmen in the

state saying many times that if the state repealed the Alaska subsistence law, the federal government would enforce subsistence on federal land.

Monday's conference with Watt was the first time that the man who is directly responsible for that enforcement has spoken on the issue since

the initiative was placed on the November ballot.

His words spoke glowingly of the ability of the state of Alaska to manage fish and game but Watt was conservative in how far he would go.

"If the Alaskan people adopt

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Watt will discuss issue if initiative passes

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Initiative Number 7, that will require a new set of circumstances and I'm sure that Gov. Hammond or Gov. Fink and I will sit down and discuss the issue and work out a new arrangement and protect the interests that must be protected under that statute and protect the wildlife of the state."

Watt, who said he discussed the subsistence issue with Republican gubernatorial candi-

date Tom Fink who is solidly against subsistence, said he and Fink didn't discuss any new kind of arrangement.

Watt did repeat, however, what he said several weeks ago in Washington state when he said the Department of Interior has no contingency plan to replace the subsistence law. "We'll just have to work it out when we have to address them."

Watt flatly refused to tell

people how to vote on the subsistence issue. "I recommend how people vote on people but not on issues."

He cautioned the press against saying there would be "immediate enforcement" of the federal law.

"That kind of words conjure up in the minds of some of you creative people images of the militia marching in and the national guard up and down the rivers of Alaska. They'll be none of that. We'll work something out. We're not going to move in with marshals and the national guard and that type of thing. We'll work something out depending on what the people of Alaska express, then we'll move accordingly."

Watt said he has "never had the luxury of focusing on the merits of the federal subsistence law but his oath of office would see him enforce it if need be.

Willie Hensley, chairman of Alaskans for Sensible Fish and Game Management, the group fighting the subsistence repeal movement in the state said he thought Watt "made a mistake" in not coming out stronger against the repeal.

"I don't see how anybody in Alaska could remotely want the federal government to step in to manage fish and game."

"I think he allowed his strong support of (Gubernatorial candidate) Fink to cloud his judgment on the issue."

Hensley said he would be present in Kotzebue this week when Watt attended a luncheon there.

Watt also was asked about the land exchange proposed by the Cook Inlet Regional Corp. for St. Mathers Island which is now a federal wildlife refuge.

CIRI has proposed exchanging some of regional corpora-

tion land holdings for the St. Mathews Island in the middle of the Bering Sea. CIRI would then use the island to lease out to oil companies to use the island as an oil exploration area staging base.

Several environmental organizations have objected to the trade because it would expose the habitat to development.

Watt said that the exchange negotiations are moving ahead well and will be completed when all parties agree on what CIRI land will be exchanged.

Watt said that his proposed reorganization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is being held up by Congress as is his plan to combine two schools for American Indians in Albuquerque, N.M.

He also said that the Department is aggressively pursuing and prosecuting people who defraud or steal from Indians who own oil land which other companies have developed.

Watt said millions of dollars are being stolen from Indian Tribes in the Lower 48 by theft, mismanagement and poor accounting.

At the press conference, Watt and Gov. Jay Hammond signed papers transferring 2.7 million acres of land from federal to state ownership. Much of the land is in the Bristol Bay area and was selected by the state in 1968.

Other parcels in the Lime Hills, Ambler, and Seward Peninsula area are rated highly for hard rock minerals. Lands other land conveyed near Lake Louise in the Talkeetna Mountains, and near Tok are eyed for recreational and settlement use.