

State officials back North Slope villages

A hearing has been set for Friday in one of the two court suits brought by North Slope Natives over an Exxon drilling pad on Duck Island in the Beaufort Sea. The villages of Kaktovik and Nuiqsut, the City of Barrow, and two individual Eskimos have sued in both Federal and State court to halt drilling till all questions regarding subsistence have been aired and proper procedures and hearings observed.

In a bizarre turn of events, the State of Alaska finds itself

supporting the Natives in one suit, and opposing them in another. Different departments of the state government are involved.

The Friday hearing is in Federal court. In this case, the Natives are suing Exxon, and the Corps of Engineers, charging that the permit was issued by the Corps of Engineers without an Environmental Impact Statement. The regulations require the EIS before any permit is given.

The State Department of En-

vironmental Conservation has issued a statement supporting the Natives in this case. Ernst Mueller, Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation, has said in an affidavit that the Corps of Engineers has violated provisions of the federal Water Pollution Control Act by not requiring a certification from Exxon that the activity meets state water quality standards.

He said the Corps of Engi-

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neers has consistently ignored state standards and regulations in issuing their permits.

Mueller said that if the Corps had complied with the requirement for certification under state standards, the state would have issued public notice and "the people could have asked for a public hearing, and all these issues could have been disposed of early on."

While the State supported the Natives in this case, it became the defendant in the other suit brought by the Natives. In this case, the State of Alaska, specifi-

cally the Commissioner of Natural Resources Robert LaResche, has been charged with failure to hold hearings, and with failing to consider the effect of the drilling on marine mammals and other species important to the subsistence lifestyle of the Natives.

Natives in the two cases are represented by Alaska Legal Services attorney Donald Clocksin, who took issue with stories printed earlier in the press which indicated there was some sort of ground swell of resistance to oil exploration by Natives. This is not the case, he said.

"I think it is important to point out that we are not just trying to stop the drilling, but to delay it till our clients are heard from. We're trying to say, 'Stop. Look at it. Talk to our clients till they can be convinced that it can be done safely,'" said Clocksin.