

# TT MUKTUK SALE FORBIDDEN

## Muktuk Tidbit Sale at Tanana Valley Fair Halted By State Health

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Staff Writer

"Muktuk is inherently unsafe."

"I eat all I can get. I just came back from Point Hope where I bought 10 lbs. from local people."

The two conflicting statements above obviously come from two different people. Both men are health experts.

Both deal with problems of health and disease in the state of Alaska. They do not agree about the dangers of eating muktuk.

The Public Health Department of the State of Alaska has turned down a request by Tundra Times for permission to serve muktuk at the Tundra Times booth during the Tanana Valley State Fair to be held in Fairbanks August 16-20.

The request was denied on the basis that muktuk can be a source of botulism and of food poisoning caused by salmonella bacteria.

Ken Torgerson, field supervisor for the State's Division of Environmental Health, said that salmonella, a common bacteria, was found in "a good many of the muktuk" they sampled.

"Muktuk," he stated, "can

cause mild to serious digestive disorders, particularly if canned or preserved in an ice cellar."

The Department of Health does not favor the sale of home-made, home-canned, or home-processed items, such as game.

The muktuk Tundra Times was to offer for sale was purchased from Joe Frankson of Point Hope, who harvested three whales this season.

Frankson's enterprise is not considered a "home" business in Point Hope, but a valid economic undertaking, and Tundra Times purchased the muktuk for purely commercial reasons.

Lacking large commercial packaging plants, muktuk is often sold in Arctic communities directly to buyers and is then flown to its destination in modern aircraft.

On the day this article was being prepared, Senator Willie Hensley had just purchased 15 pounds of muktuk in Barrow and was enroute home to Kotzebue.

Some varieties of game meat are offered for sale in the Arctic Circle in regular community grocery stores, caribou for example. Torgerson said this was authorized by the Fish and Game Department but that his own department frowns on this practice.

When the sale is to Native people, he felt there were fewer

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incidences of food poisoning.

"There are recorded cases of people becoming less susceptible to bacteria in foods that are normal to them," said Torgerson. "This is what is known as the classical 'iron stomach'."

He could give no accurate statistics as to the number of cases of food poisonings in the Native population per year.

On a nationwide basis, he estimated there are one to two million cases a year, although the statistics are difficult to assess, as many people find it hard to distinguish between common flu symptoms and food poisoning.

"Probably every Native experiences it (food poisoning) no less than once," said Torgerson. As for botulism he said, "There are relatively few deaths due to botulism, nationwide."

"Botulism comes from anerob-

ic organisms, anerobic meaning "growing without oxygen." It is most likely to occur, he said, in pickled muktuk.

Part of the State Health Department's objection is to the conditions under which the meat is handled.

Torgerson said, "It's stripped out on the beach, where there is not a great deal of sanitation or care. Eskimos," he added, "will eat a seal, after deliberately letting it bloat."

Howard Rock, born and raised in Point Hope said "this is definitely not true."

Torgerson's comments included criticisms on "the way food is handled, throwing fish or game on the ground where dogs can urinate on it or in the neighborhood of dog feces."

"No, no, that's not the case," said the dissenting expert we interviewed. "The Eskimos are very, very careful about keeping the meat clean. It is harvested way out on the ice and they're very cautious about getting it off the ice quickly."

"It's obvious," he added, "they've made the connection between contact with the ground and sanitation. They've been harvesting and eating muktuk for years."

Lawrence Miller, bacteriologist of the Arctic Health Research Center was on vacation and not available for comment, but Dorothy Whitney, information officer, said the Center is doing studies on the subject, but that they are in process and the final results were not ready at this time.

The problem with muktuk, she said, is that it is raw, and "that ANY raw meat, fowl, fish, or beef, as well as muktuk, could be a source of infection."

While the likelihood of botulism appeared to be minimal and the incidence of salmonella in frozen meat not great, Ms. Whitney explained that the charge of the Public Health Department is to protect the public.

The problem may lie in regulatory procedures. Public sale of muktuk outside of Native communities is fairly recent and there seem to be no secure guidelines among officials as to setting up standards.

The Fairbanks Native Association was allowed to serve muktuk at their annual potlatch this spring, which is attended by about three to four thousand people, not all of them Native by any means.

The never-ending search for exciting foods by the worlds official and unofficial gourmets is likely to create an even greater demand for muktuk by the general public in the future.