

A sign of spring

As sure as the fur seals swim north every spring, leaders of the Aleutians-Pribilofs Association fly south to fight the perennial battle to save the seal harvest on St. Paul Island.

This year a congressional committee reviewing the National Marine Fisheries Service has recommended cutting the budget for the harvest completely and once again the forces on each side of the issue have to dust off the same old arguments, spend time and money that could be used better in other areas and head for Washington, D.C.

Conservationists argue against the killings, perhaps confusing it with the harp seal harvest off the east coast of Canada. But, studies have shown the St. Paul fur seal herd, at about 1.5 million animals, to be in good shape, while the herd at the St. George rookery which hasn't been used since 1974 is declining.

By taking young adult bulls, the beaches are clearer for females and the herd appears to be stabilized at what wildlife managers have called an optimum level.

Over the issue hangs the threat of pelagic sealing by Japan, Canada and Russia which was eliminated by the treaty that led to the harvest on St. Paul. Profits from the effort are shared among the four countries. Should the harvest stop there's every reason to believe the other countries might return to hunting on the open sea where it's difficult to distinguish between a pregnant female, a mature bull and even a yearling pup.

Also, there's the question of an economic base for the villages on the islands. Few jobs are available and the seal harvest brings much-needed paychecks to the people on the island, without which there would be a lot more money put out in various forms of welfare. And, the islanders have the opportunity to use the seal meat to supplement their diets.

Between 25,000 and 30,000 seals are harvested each year on the island, providing more meat than villagers can use and that's one of the arguments against the hunt. However, somewhere in the world there is a use for that meat. Everywhere there are cries about food shortages, protein deficiencies, famines.

With the Reagan administration pushing for people to work, why must it take the people of St. Paul out of the work force and put them in a position of costing the government more money? Perhaps instead of paying out the welfare money, those funds could instead be used for research into the values of seal meat and derivatives and develop markets for it. All that could result is a healthy seal herd, a healthy population on the two islands and perhaps an influx of good food where it might be needed.