

Pribiloff seal harvest battle resumes

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Once again the Pribilovians are being called upon to fight for their survival in the halls of Congress. In the past 10 years, Pribiloff leaders have traveled 6,000 miles to Washington no less than 10 times to confront well organized efforts to stop the seal harvest, with partial success. Although the fur seal harvest has continued on St. Paul, an indefinite moratorium on the St. George harvest was declared in 1974.

Federal officials maintained that this action was justified on the basis of a need to study seals in a natural environment; Pribiloff Aleuts believe that, given the scientific proof of a healthy and stable fur seal herd, the action was an effort to politically pacify vocal anti-harvest groups without any consideration of affects on the St. George Aleuts. As a result of the moratorium,

young people have been (and are) leaving the economically depressed village for job opportunities elsewhere, palcing the village's survivability in question.

The moratorium continues despite recent scientific evidence that the fur seal birth rate is declining on St. George while St. Paul's seal birth rate remains stable. What the scientists are discovering is that the non-breeding male seals are displacing the breeding females in the rookeries, causing the declining birth rate.

According to U.S. government scientists, the evidence accumulated in the past 20 years overwhelmingly supports the continuation of the fur seal harvest. Despite the evidence, the committee responsible for reviewing all National Marine Fisheries Service Programs, has recommended out of committee that the FY 82 Pribiloff budget be cut 100 percent. This action is viewed as the most serious

threat to Pribiloff village survival ever faced in their history. It was only through the alertness of the Alaska delegation that Pribiloff leadership was notified of this action.

Immediately, the Aleuts called an emergency meeting of leaders to discuss the impacts and potential responses. In a 26-page impacts analysis developed by the Pribilovians and sent to Washington, the conclusions graphically and poignantly described this action as tantamount to genocide through total elimination of the largest Aleut population center in the world. Among the conclusions, the report lists the items which will be eliminated by the budget cut, including cessation of marine freight service, fuel supply delivery, electricity generation, water and sewer system operation, International Fur Seal Treaty, elimination of 73 percent of local employment and all retirement benefits to all Aleuts who worked for the federal government prior to 1950.

The report states despite genocide and enslavement at the hands of the Russians, oppression and discrimination at the

hands of the U.S. government until 1966, internment in World War II by the U.S. government which resulted in death of 25 percent of its population due to malnutrition and disease, Pribiloff Aleuts hold no hatred for anyone and believe in working in the system toward their unyielding commitment to achieve self determination and self sufficiency.

The statement concludes: "Withdrawal of the government funds at this time will effectively eliminate all they (Pribiloff Aleuts) have worked for and place the villages in conditions which existed over 150 years ago. To do this without the government giving Pribiloff Aleuts the necessary tools to develop self-sufficiency and allowing adequate time will result in no less than cultural, racial and social genocide."

Presently, The House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee recommendation is before the Appropriations Committee. The Alaska congressional delegation, The Alaska legislative representatives for the Aleutians, the governor's office and two law firms are attempting to assist

the Pribilovians, but all conclude that the efforts may restore FY 82 funds but hold little hope for FY 83.

Pribiloff Aleuts have fought valiantly for their rights in the past, succeeding in obtaining full rights to be treated as U.S. citizens in the 1960's after bringing attention to their plight from the United Nations, the Human Rights Commission and a congressional investigation.

Aleut leaders are preparing now for what they view as their most important battle in one war that was launched against them over a decade ago.

