

Eskimo Walrus Commission signs agreement with Fish & Wildlife Service before accusations

by Jamie Tanner
special to the Tundra Times

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Eskimo Walrus Commission signed an agreement concerning walrus hunting at the Alaska Federation of Natives convention on Friday.

The groups have agreed to talk to each other before making accusatory statements on wasteful killing of marine mammals, said executive secretary to the Walrus Commission, Caleb Pengowiyi.

This agreement has been needed, and informally followed since September after federal wildlife agents blamed ivory poachers in the death of dozens of walruses last summer, according to Pengowiyi.

Native hunters were angered and called the accusation unfounded and unfair, said Pengowiyi.

The Walrus Commission will work with the Native community to become more self-regulating and report any suspected of hunting marine mammals illegally, according to the agreement.

Fish and Wildlife agents have agreed to consult with the Walrus commission during an investigation of suspected ille-

gal walrus hunting if the do not have a suspect yet.

The Togaik Natives persuaded the Alaska Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation's Game Board to allow hunting to resume in 1995, to keep the subsistence tradition of walrus hunting alive.

This year's hunt began on Monday, October 14. The self-imposed quota of 10 a year will be divided by the seven villages represented on the Qayassiq Walrus Commission. These include Aleknagik, Dillingham, Manokotak, Togiak, Ekak and Clark's Point.

The hunts are monitored by state and federal observers and a biologist. Hunting take place on Round Island, part of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary.

Friends of Animals, a national anti-hunting organization, has petitioned Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to stop the walrus hunt.

"We believe that the recent reports over the summer of walrus poaching in the Bering and Chukchi Seas makes the sanctuary even more important now," said organization president Priscilla Feral.

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The biggest threat to the hunters right now seems to be the state budget. The legislature made budget cuts for the sanctuary aimed at management and research, said Dana Seagars, senior walrus biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Without some money from the state, there may (not be any) observers next year," said Seagars.

State and federal agencies and the Bristol Bay Native Association gathered enough funds from other sources to pay for the observers this year.

After battling all summer over the poaching accusations, the Walrus Commission and Fish and Wildlife officials are happy to agree to work together and educate the public on legal and non-wasteful walrus hunting, according to representatives from both organizations.