

Aleuts File Suit in Desperation--

Suit Against AEC Reflects People's Tragic Past

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Nowhere in Alaska has the history of the native people been as bloody and harsh as that of the once numerous inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands. Massacred and conquered by the Russians, reduced to generations of slave labor, only about 3500 Aleuts still inhabit the many islands of the wind swept chain stretching thousands of miles

southwest of Mainland Alaska.

Last week, in the U.S. District Court in Anchorage, the Aleut League began actions to oppose still another possible threat to their people—the scheduled Atomic Energy Commission 5 megaton Cannikin blast.

In a complaint filed September 2, Aleut League President Iliodor Philemonof, on behalf of the 3500 Aleut residents of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands,

asked the federal court to prevent the AEC from detonating its atomic test on Amchitka Island.

As an action by a native group, the Aleut suit is unprecedented.

The Aleut people today, as they have from time immemorial earn their living from the sea which surrounds their island homes. Their biggest fear, from

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the largest underground nuclear test in the United States, is that some form of radiation will leak into the sea—polluting the ocean and the ocean life which gives them sustenance and income.

"They are afraid, skeptical that something might happen," Philemonof characterized his people in a telephone interview with the TUNDRA TIMES on Friday. "Their greatest fear is of radiation leakage into the ocean—affecting the marine life on which the Aleut people depend for their survival."

Probably, and the AEC has a host of experts who will state the excellent statistical probabilities—the nuclear blast at Amchitka will produce no great deleterious effects.

There is very little probability of large scale earthquake, tsunami, volcanic action or radiation leakage into either the atmosphere or the ocean. However, the very possibility of such occurrences frightens the Aleut people—who ask the U.S. court why their homes and livelihoods have been chosen to be endangered by nuclear testing.

According to Alaska Legal Services attorney Hugh Fleisher, who is handling the Aleut action, the League will probably move within the next two to three weeks to ask for an injunction to prevent the AEC from going ahead with the Cannikin blast.

They will ask for hearings on the suit—hearings at which they will present scientific experts, testimony from concerned Aleuts and other witnesses.

While the suit, of course, may be denied, Philemonof and the Aleut League attorneys believe that they are on firm legal and factual grounds. Although most of the Aleut Islands have been set aside by the U.S. government as wildlife refuge and/or military bases, the entire chain is claimed by the Aleut League as part of their ancestral lands.

Seventeen Aleut villages dot the chain, inhabited by descendants of a people who have lived and worked these islands for at least 8,000 years.

It is these people who claim they are being endangered by a massive nuclear test—a test whose affects threaten their lives, personal property and livelihood

without any real form of emergency contingency planning, or precautions.

According to the Aleut League complaint, the proposed Cannikin test violates the rights of their people in several ways.

Cannikin is a high risk experiment threatening "destruction of and/or the most serious risk of deleterious effect to the lives, property, commerce and cultures of the Aleut people."

Among these risks, the suit mentions possible earthquake, volcanic eruption, tsunami, contamination of the air and/or marine environment. As such, the Aleuts claim the AEC blast constitutes an "absolute and intolerable nuisance."

The suit claims the blast violates the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act. Among these violations is, they claim, that no alternatives were reasonably investigated.

The Aleuts claim that the proposed actions of the AEC constitute an abrogation of the United States governments' responsibility to the Aleuts as native people of Alaska—to whom the U.S. Department of the Interior owes specific obligations to safeguard their rights and well being.

"DEFENDANTS' [the AEC] actions are in violations of PLAINTIFFS' [Aleut] rights as citizens of the United States and of their free enjoyment of their liberty, property and religion in that DEFENDANTS' preparation for and planned execution of the CANNIKIN nuclear experiment amounts to a violation of the PLAINTIFFS' Fifth Amendment rights to due process and guarantee against taking of private property without just compensation."

Less than a week before he acted as representative of the Aleut League to file the suit against the AEC, Iliodor Philemonof, a native of the Pribilof Island of St. George who now lives in Anchorage, participated on an AEC sponsored junket to Amchitka to see the preparations for the giant Cannikin blast.

"It was sort of impressive," he told the TUNDRA TIMES that day, "All of that time and money spent there that could have been spent otherwise."