

Hearings held on subsistence crisis

By LONE E. JANSON

"If Ahtna had realized that the subsistence lifestyle of its shareholders was vulnerable to the extent that the last four years has demonstrated, the Ahtna/Alyeska Omnibus Agreement would have explicitly covered subsistence or never been signed."

That statement was part of the testimony presented by Ahtna, Inc., the Native corporation for the Copper Center area during recent hearings into the subsistence crisis in that area.

Two hearings were held by Department of Interior representatives at places about forty miles apart, with a reportedly good turnout at both hearings. The inquiries came in response to repeated protests and several law suits against the Interior Department alleging that a subsistence crisis now exists on the upper Copper River due to the combined effects of pipeline construction and massive layoffs by Alyeska's contractor for maintenance of the pipeline.

The layoffs occurred in October, when Alyeska failed to award the maintenance contract to Meridian Contracting Corporation, a subsidiary of Ahtna. Meridian had the highest proportion of Native hire of any comparable contractor in the state, and with the award of the maintenance to an outside firm, 34 of 37 Ahtna Natives working on the line were laid off.

The timing of the loss of jobs, combined with the exceptionally poor year for Copper River fishing, the recent decline in hunting, and the chronic unemployment in the area, has brought on a subsistence crisis in the area.

Two lawsuits have been filed against the Interior Department to compel the department to draft regulations covering application for relief in such a crisis, and asking for assistance in the emergency.

One suit was filed by Ahtna, Inc., the other by the "Copper River Four," four elderly Copper River Natives arrested last summer for subsistence fishing during a closure they had not heard about. The Copper River at the time was closed to subsistence fishing, except on weekends, but was left open for sports fishing all week. All four of the men were over 65 years of age.

A large crowd attended the hearings, one of which was held at Glenrich, near the Tok Cut-off, and the other at the Ahtna Lodge. There was a strong feel-

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ing expressed by the Natives that the decrease in fishing was a direct result of disturbances of the river during the 1978 parent cycle year of the Copper River red salmon.

Ahtna pointed out that other subsistence resources have suffered also as a result of massive pipeline impact.

"The pipeline greatly increased access to the area for the urban dwellers of Anchorage and Fairbanks," they asserted, and combined with the increased use of snowmobiles and off-road vehicles, animals traditionally used have declined in numbers and their movements have been interfered with.