

According to Arctic Gas—

Polar Bears OK on Gas Pipeline

ANCHORAGE—Fears that a natural gas pipeline may adversely affect large numbers of polar bears denning on the Alaskan North Slope coastal plain have been allayed by results of independent research sponsored by Alaskan Arctic Gas Pipeline Company.

Alaskan Arctic Gas and its sister firm, Canadian Arctic, propose to bring huge natural gas resources from Alaska's Prudhoe Bay and the Canadian Mackenzie Delta region to southern consumers in both nations via a 2,600-mile, large-diameter pipeline.

The pipeline would tap an Alaskan gas pool equal to more than 10% of this country's proved gas reserves.

Greg Moore, polar bear researcher for Renewable Re-

sources Consulting Services, has described denning observations collected over the past nine years, which indicate early ice formation should allow a larger number of polar bears to reach the coast.

The survey this year was designed to compare inland den usage between early and late ice years, and provide a more accurate picture of the importance of inland den areas to the Beaufort Sea Polar bears, a species protected by the federal Marine Mammals Protection Act.

"This in turn is important, because a pipeline route crossing inland regions could impact critical denning areas," Moore said.

This year's research, however, found "no correlation between early and late ice years and the number of polar bears reaching the coast," Moore said.

"We also found no inland dens in the surveyed area, which is the only region along the route to see repeated use by the bears. Studies to date indicate polar bears make only occasional and infrequent use of inland dens."

He said the region, 10 miles

wide and 15 miles deep, was surveyed using a single-engine light aircraft at an altitude of 300 to 500 feet.

The three dens located were plotted and mapped as were all track systems of the bears. Research the prior year also found three active den sites.

"I am satisfied with the accuracy of air observation in surveying polar bear," added Moore, a veteran also of caribou and grizzly bear monitoring efforts. "We also could distinguish and verify tracks of Arctic fox and such birds as ptarmigan."

Data received from the \$18,000 studies were shared with U.S. Fish and Wildlife service personnel to evaluate the entire north Alaskan coast, and compare to last year's survey, he added. Total air observation hours in the cooperative effort totaled 112.

The pipeline project currently is the subject of public hearings by the Federal Power Commission and the Department of Interior in the United States, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the National Energy Board in Canada.