

Pribilof fishermen gain powerful ally: Haig

The seal hunters of the Pribilof Islands gained a strong ally in their battle to retain seal hunting rights on the island last week when Secretary of State Alexander Haig went on the record as opposing an amendment to the International Seal hunting treaty.

The treaty amendment, supported by congressional Democrats and some conservation groups, would severely curtail the seal harvest in the Pribilofs and force a good portion of the population out of their sole means of support.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was scheduled to make a recommendation on the treaty Wednesday, after Tundra Times press time but it is believed that Haig's support will give needed leverage to the

Alaskan representatives opposing the amendment.

The present treaty calls for taking between 24,000 and 28,000 bachelor bulls for seals each year. If the treaty is passed, a 70 percent cutback would occur and only 8,000 seals would be allowed to be harvested.

Larry Mercurief, president of Tanadgusix and the St. Paul Village Corporation, estimates that 73 percent of the employment on the island is provided by the seal harvest.

The seal hunt is the village's sole industry, he says.

Haig's move came after he met with Alaska representatives who sought his and the administration support for maintaining the present treaty.

Sen. Ted Stevens said Haig's

public support would mean "all the difference in the world to fight because it would mean the Reagan administration was behind the treaty as it stands.

Haig voiced his support in a letter to Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Sen. Charles Percy, (R-Ill.). He wrote "The reduction in harvest is without scientific justification and Department of Commerce scientists fear that such precipitous action would have unforeseen effects on seal stocks.

Haig also noted the disastrous effect the treaty would have on the 600 Aleut hunters on St. Paul and George Islands who rely, and have relied for hundreds of years, on the harvest, and he criticized the amendment for not considering the issue of Native subsistence

harvest and the effects the amendment would make on the lives of Natives in the area.

A change in the Treaty between the U.S., Japan, Canada and the Soviet Union, was proposed by Senate Democrats urged on by animal conservation groups who contended that the U.S. shouldn't subsidize the seal harvest.

The government acts as a clearing house for the furs harvested on the Pribilofs. The subsidy amounts to \$4 million spent a year.

Although Republicans held a slight membership edge on the committee, it was believed last week that the amendment would have been approved. Sen. Stevens at that time sought Haig's support for the fight and said his support "would make

all the difference in the world."

More ammunition against the amendment was fired in Juneau Monday when Gov. Jay Hammond and the state legislature passed a resolution to send to Foreign Relations Committee urging defeat of the amendment.

The resolution said "The economy of the Pribilof Islands is almost totally dependent on the continuation of the fur seal harvest at its current level and the proposed reduction will have dire consequences."

The National Wildlife Federation has supported the present treaty but the Friends of the Animals has supported the amendment. The powerful Sierra Club and Audubon Society have taken no stand on the matter.