

Fear drives deep subsistence wedge

by Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer

The subsistence question is simply stated: "Do Alaskans want to give a preference for subsistence use of fish and game in times of shortages to those most dependent on them? The emotional issues surrounding subsistence are not simple or easily stated. The debate identifies the core beliefs and value systems of many different segments of Alaska's Family.

Governor Knowles and I have listened intently to Alaskans who wish to begin a process to regain Alaska's right to manage its fish and game. The subsistence issue requires an Alaskan solution and all Alaskans have the responsibil-

ity to participate in the process. Alaskans I have spoken with are not shy in letting us know how they feel, what their position is, and why their solution is best. Before we collectively find the best workable solution, we need to listen to each other's views and assumptions.

I have heard that "Subsistence is for Natives only." "Subsistence already takes most of the fish and game." "Subsistence is bad for wildlife conservation." I have come to realize that some of these misconceptions have been repeated so often that many people assume they are true. The facts may surprise you.

Is the rural preference a Native preference? Subsistence law at the

state and federal level is not racially based. A majority of the rural residents of our state are non-Natives. Of the 111,000 Alaskans living in rural communities, 55% are non-Native. With the exception of some marine mammals and migratory birds, little or no distinction is made in existing state or federal law between Alaskan Natives and non-Natives with regards to subsistence on public lands.

How much of the resource is harvested by subsistence users? The current rural subsistence harvest is approximately one pound of food per day per person. About 60 percent of this food is fish, with land mammals constituting about

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18 percent, marine mammals 15 percent, and the remainder being made up of birds, crabs, clams, berries and plants. Figures released by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game show that subsistence constitutes approximately 4 percent of the total harvest. Sport hunters and fishermen take 1 percent. The remaining 95 percent is utilized by commercial interests. Of course, these figures vary widely from region to region, but commercial fishing is by far the leader in overall volume.

Is subsistence another name for welfare? The ability to provide for your own needs and those of your family is a cornerstone of our democracy. The traditional hunting, gathering, and fishing activities

used by many Alaskans to supply their basic needs provides more than a simple corresponding dollar value to that person, family and community. To link the terms welfare and subsistence is misleading because no income criteria apply under federal or state law. Subsistence is the clearest expression of self-reliance and community cooperation. In many respects, subsistence is the antithesis of welfare.

Is subsistence use compatible with conservation strategies? Most areas designated as "wilderness" today are the traditional homelands of subsistence peoples. Thousands of years of harvesting within these areas of our state indicate that this activity is compatible with wilderness preservation and conservation practices. How-

ever, the dramatic increase in population, given the limited carrying capacity of some of Alaska's ecosystems, requires us to evaluate and adjust to deal with these changes.

Will other uses of fish and game be threatened under a single subsistence management plan? I believe the most prevalent myth that holds the state back from developing a consensus on subsistence is that commercial and sports interests will be hurt if fish and game management includes a subsistence preference. The Knowles/Ulmer administration, through the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, is committed to providing sound science and management practices that will ensure a sustainable harvest level and will provide reasonable access to all Alaskans. With proper planning, there will be enough to share.

If we take no action, the divisions in our state will become deeper and harder to bridge. Alaskans have had a long and proud tradition of managing our resources. We must not abandon the tradition of compromise and cooperation just because it is hard to do. Every Alaskan has a stake in finding a solution.

Editor's Note: This is the second in series of commentaries by Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer.