

# State starts spill area tests for subsistence seafoods

by Warren Jarvis  
for the Tundra Times

Beginning last week, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game kicked off the latest round of subsistence foods testing in areas hit by last year's *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

According to department spokesman Jim Fall, the \$250,000 program will encompass 12 areas in Prince William Sound and lower Cook Inlet. The testing program will consist of three phases: winter, spring and summer. The \$250,000 budget is only for the winter and spring phases.

The tests are designed to complement an earlier series of tests run by various agencies from June to September of last year, Fall said. The samples will be taken from the same areas as last year's tests, he said, to compare results and see what changes have occurred in hydrocarbon levels in animals.

A hydrocarbon is any compound made up of hydrogen and oxygen. Oil, such as that spilled by the *Exxon Valdez* last spring, is made up of hydrocarbons.

continued on page nine



*Bill Wilson and Hal Weeks, fisheries biologists, testify at the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council meeting in Anchorage earlier this month. Among issues discussed by the council was limited access for sablefish.*

## • Oil testing

*continued from page one*

When distilled, hydrocarbons can be turned into such useful compounds as heating oil or gasoline.

When in the flesh of an animal exposed to oil, however, the hydrocarbons can cause sickness, unconsciousness, or even death. Some forms of hydrocarbons, called "heavy" because of their larger molecular structure, are known carcinogens.

According to Fall, last year's tests showed unacceptable levels of hydrocarbons only in shellfish, such as mussels and clams.

These animals, he said, possess different physical processes than fish life, resulting in longer retention of hydrocarbons in their bodies. Also, by living on the beaches, they are continually exposed to the oil, whereas fish can swim around or at least out of any oil they contact.

The level of contamination varied by location, with some shellfish showing no trace of oil, while the mussels from the Kodiak Harbor and Windy Bay areas would be above U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines.

This year's tests, Fall said, were prompted by the concerns of residents about the previous tests. One of the most prominent concerns is that last year's sample size of 150 was too small.

Sample size in the 13 areas varied last year from two at Windy Bay, to 20 at Port Lions.

The upcoming tests, by contrast, will collect 120 samples in each of the winter and spring phases. Fall estimated \$850 per test, leaving roughly 54 tests unaccounted for. These tests, Fall said, will be used to meet special village requests and to test other animals such as seals, sea lions, deer and waterfowl.

In addition to the state's program, Exxon is planning to initiate a smaller test program during the week of Feb. 26.

According to Steve Lewis, an Exxon toxicologist with the project, the testing program is intended to respond to areas of village concern. The samples taken, Lewis said, will only be of shellfish, and no particular number of samples has been set.

"It's more of a village response program than a designed experiment... there's no set protocol," Lewis said.