

# Pribilof bill signed:

## Aleuts look to uncertain future

President Reagan signed into law last Friday a bill providing \$20 million trust fund to help the people of the Pribilof Islands establish an economy not based on the harvesting of fur seals. The Aleuts of the island were first shipped there as slaves to harvest the fur seals by the Russians in 1786. The U.S. kept the Pribilof Aleuts in a state of virtual servitude for the same purpose into the 1950's and early 60's.

Just over two years ago, the Aleuts won a suit against the government in which they were awarded \$7 million dollars as payment for labor taken from them without compensation by the government. Within the last month, the people have received the first individual payments from that fund, which had rising to \$8.5 million with interest, of \$6,500 each. They will receive an additional payment of about \$2,000 around the first of the new year.

Due largely to a seal skin market which has failed to generate a profit in recent years, and to pressure from environmentalist and "animal

lovers," the government recently decided to pull out of the seal hunt. The \$20 million will be used largely to help the people develop a bottom-fish industry.

The state is building new harbors in the islands, which sit in the middle of some of the richest fishing grounds in the world.

Flore Lekanof, president of the St. George Tanaq Village corporation, is confident the people will find a good new life. "I welcome the freedom," Lekanof said recently.

Gabe Stepetin of St. Paul Island, who was instrumental in launching the suit which led to the \$7 million dollar award, is less confident. Lekanof worries that many of the people will be forced off the islands into Anchorage and elsewhere by poor economics, and that non-Native fishermen and other exploiters will take over in the Pribilofs, putting an end to the community.

The Tundra Times is working on a more complete report which will follow at a later date.