

Native leaders differ over subsistence

Alternatives debated

by Geoff Kennedy

for the Tundra Times

Differences, not divisions.

That's how three Native spokesmen characterize relationships among Native groups trying to ensure subsistence hunting and fishing rights.

"There's a willingness to talk. I don't see people stop talking to each other or stop working with each other," said Julie Kitka, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives.

The AFN board last week reaffirmed its position in favor of changing the Alaska Constitution to provide a subsistence preference for rural Alaskans.

Kitka said the board recognizes that

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many Alaska Natives want a constitutional amendment to provide a preference for Natives. But, she said, the board met with the Bush Caucus, Senate President Tim Kelly, R-Anchorage, House Speaker Sam Cotten, D-Eagle River, and Gov. Steve Cowper and concluded the votes aren't there for a Native preference.

Instead, Kitka said, the board committed the AFN to working on rural preference legislation already proposed by Cowper and Rep. George Jacko, D-Pedro Bay. She said AFN attorneys are working on amending the existing proposals to include language addressing Native cultures and traditions.

"I don't think we're divided. We're not doing battle with AFN at all," said Robert Willard, president of the Southeast Native Subsistence Commission. The commission, consisting of representatives from 23 Southeast Alaska communities, formed last month to concentrate only on subsistence issues.

The commission supports amending the constitution to provide a Native preference.

"We're hanging our hearts on the culture and the youth," he said. Willard said he grew up in a fish camp in Angoon and he wants his daughter to be able to live in her Native culture as well.

"That's what this fight is all about."

Willard disagrees with the rural preference.

That, Willard said, would return the state to the situation that existed before the State Supreme Court declared the state law unconstitutional. The court ruled in December that the existing rural preference law unfairly treated its citizens according to where they live.

"The AFN approach is a quick fix to get back into compliance (with federal law) with no consideration for improvement. 'Rural' has not been defined. I don't see how it can be. It leaves too much to the interpretation of a less-than-sympathetic judicial system," he said.

Willard supports a resolution introduced last week by Rep. Kay Wallis, D-Fort Yukon. Wallis proposes amending the constitution to

provide a subsistence preference for Native and rural Alaskans.

"We have great faith in the Alaska electorate," Willard said. "I think they'll understand and vote accordingly."

Willard disagrees with the contention by Congressman Don Young, R-Alaska, that a Native preference would divide the state. It's not a race issue, Willard said.

"It's a fight to maintain cultures."

Paul Swetzof of the Alaska Native Coalition agrees with Willard. A Native preference, Swetzof said, is not based on race, but on the political status of tribes.