

# Herring plan is top priority

They came from all over Western and Northwest Alaska. More than 50 fishermen and others concerned about how to properly develop the new herring fishery which has reaped a bonanza for some Alaska fishermen the past couple of years.

Growth of the fishery has been explosive. Beginning in 1977 more and more fishermen from other parts of the state have crowded into Western Alaska to break into and take advantage of a market based on the Japanese demand for herring roe.

From 1967 to 1976, the average herring take was about 116 metric tons. In 1977, it jumped to 2,540 metric tons. In 1978, it jumped again, this time to 7,033 metric tons. And then this season it jumped even higher, with 10,000 metric tons being taken in Bristol Bay alone, 1,200 tons taken in Norton Sound, 385 metric tons in Security Cove (fished for the first time this year), and 82 metric tons taken in Goodnews Bay.

But, most of this tonnage was not taken by the people who live in the area, though they did manage to take a fairly healthy percentage this season and hope to take even more next year -- if they go about it the right way and the policies and programs they support are adopted.

The new fishery represents a mixed blessing for Western Alaska's local fishermen. It is an opportunity to make more money than has been available before, with most of that

money returning to the villages in the form of jobs and income. But, on the other hand, exploitation of the fishery may represent a threat to the subsistence lifestyle of the surrounding villages.

Those who attended the "Herring Hearing" held in Anchorage August 9 and 10 under the sponsorship of the Alaska Native Foundation (ANF), were here to grapple with those problems trade information, and figure some sort of strategy so that they could garner the economic benefits of the new fishery yet protect the resource from overexploitation and irrevocable damage to a food source that provides subsistence for many, and has done so for years.

It's a complex situation, and it's solution probably will rely as much on politics as it does on developing the right technology.

"The major problem is the conflict between subsistence use of herring with

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**CONCERNED WITH SUBSISTENCE** -- David Nanalook, Sr., of Togiak voiced his concern that commercial exploitation may wipe out subsistence herring stocks.

# Herring development plan needed

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commercial harvests," explained David Nanalook, Sr. of Togiak. "I can see people wiping out their own food supply for a few dollars today..."

And, most of the persons attending the conference agreed that the focus of that problem is the degree to which non-local purse seiners should be allowed to exploit the fishery as opposed to the local gill net fleets.

An example of this problem occurred in the Shaktoolik area when 23 purse seiners showed up. They took about 640 metric tons while local gill netters took only about 45 metric tons.

The local gill netters are small, lack mechanical equipment, and because of their low carrying capacity have to make many trips between the fishing grounds and processors. The purse seiners, on the other hand are larger, packed with mechanical equipment, and are much more efficient. Just a few of them could take the whole Western Alaska harvest unless proper guidelines are established.

A relatively small monetary investment is needed for a gill netter. Most of the fishermen at the meeting said they would be willing to invest about \$10,000 to get the proper equipment for a good return. But, as all the fishermen agreed, gill netting is back-breaking work, and some allowed they might want to get a purse seiner of their own in the future, through a fisheries cooperative or some other arrangement.

Purse seiners represent a relatively large investment and thus must seek a high return. And it is the pressure from this combination that makes the local fishermen wary.

"This virgin industry has always been violated and Western Alaska fishermen face many obstacles to realize goals of local benefit of traditional herring resources," ANF President Roger Lang told the group. "Purse seiners have influence, have dollars to back them up, they have boats to spare due to the decline in resources elsewhere, and herring fishing in Western Alaska fits in with their fishing schedule."

But, David Hoffman, a staffer on the Alaska State Legislature's Interim Committee on Subsistence, points out that the seiners were the entrepreneurs who first opened the fishery and should not be unreasonably restricted. "They have developed, though considerable risk-taking and hard work a

highly efficient method of taking herring," Hoffman said in a draft report to his committee.

He recommended in the report that a minimum take of 33 percent be reserved to local gill netters. This he said might provide adequate protection for gill netters, while not imposing unreasonable restrictions on seiners.

But, Jimmy Huntington, a member of the Board of Fisheries and an ardent supporter of Western Alaska fishermen's interests, said the local people have a prior right to the resource since it has been a traditional source of their livelihood. "The state has the obligation to give the local people the opportunity to earn this livelihood which is now being encroached by commercial pressures," Huntington said.

At the conclusion of their meeting, most of those attending agreed on a set of general goals. First, they should seek unity among themselves in order to present a united front when approaching the various state and federal regulatory agencies. And, along that line, local benefit from traditional herring fishing should be emphasized, with more input by local people over the management policies determined by regulatory agencies. Above all, the attendees agreed, escapement of the herring should be protected so that subsistence use of the herring comes first over commercial exploitation.

And to accomplish those general goals, the group agreed that the Western Alaska fishermen should seek and use local planning funds, see that more research is done, develop financing programs for small fishermen, investigate markets more closely, and develop a marketing association. In addition, local processing opportunities should be explored, and alternate uses of herring studied.

The fishermen have only a short time to accomplish these objectives. The North Pacific Fisheries Management Council is preparing a herring management plan, which they say will be ready sometime in November. In the meantime, the council convenes August 22 for an overall yeild meeting.

Even more urgent, proposals for management of the fishery have to be in Juneau by September 15 so that they may be considered by the Alaska Board of Fisheries for action in early December. The fishermen

also hope to have developed a village plan by November also for consideration by the Board of Fisheries. And, the fishermen have to have their act together by mid-December in order to plan strategy for the next session of the legislature.

In order to accomplish all this, a series of meetings have been scheduled for September and October. Herring seminars will be held in Kotzebue on September 6, in Nome on September 8, in Unalakleet on September 10, and in Bethel on October 6.

As Jesse Foster of Security Cove said at the beginning of last week's meeting, "We made many mistakes this past year; we will not

make these mistakes next year." He said he expected to see better equipment, more knowledge, and more experience. "I expect to see two-to-three times more local fishermen out."