

Caribou treaty necessary

From The Tanana Chief's Conference *The Council*

A nation-to-nation treaty between the United States and Canada is the most practical path to sound management of the Arctic Porcupine caribou herd.

The herd's more than 100,000 animals migrate between Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada's Yukon Territory. The caribou are an important source of meat to subsistence hunters on both sides of the border.

The International Porcupine Caribou Commission has sought an international treaty since the group was chartered a year ago in Arctic Village. Residents of the area have pushed for an international agreement for more than six years. This fall Alaska Gov. Bill Sheffield met in Juneau with U.S. members of the IPCC. He agreed that the state should support an international agreement.

The governor's support is an important step forward. Under the Hammond administration the state tried to diffuse plans for a caribou treaty. The state feared it would lose control over some of its fish and game resources. Hammond and his Fish and Game commissioner, Ron Skoog, worked instead to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding between Alaska and the Yukon territorial government.

Any such memorandum would be virtually meaningless. It could be cast aside at the whim of any new Alaska governor or Yukon territorial leader. Sound resource management is based on firm, consistent policy. The Porcupine herd should be managed by international treaty negotiated between the U.S. State Department and the Canadian Department of External Affairs.

Sheffield's support for joint international management of the herd was closely guarded. He and Fish and Game Commissioner Don Collinsworth said the word "treaty" implies federal rather than state control over the herd. The state will insist on management authority and representation on any international boards or commissions.

Opponents of the international agreement argue that the state could lose all control over the herd. Ron Somerville, Division of Game director under the Hammond administration, is now the head of the Alaska Sportsman's Council. He resigned from his position with Fish and Game because of his outspoken position against subsistence. As head of the sportsman's group, he represents more than 5,000 sport hunters and fishermen statewide.

The sportsmen's fear of loss of state authority is unfounded. A properly negotiated international agreement would include assurances that the state would continue to manage the herd's habitat and harvest quotas in Alaska. The agreement would also allow the state to watch over the herd while it is in Canada.

Proper management of the herd means that local user groups on both sides of the border would be involved in research and policy decisions.

Bold and decisive moves are needed to save this important resource from damage brought by mineral development or excessive harvests.