

Fur Seal Treaty delayed until after recess

by Jim Benedetto
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With the Pribilof Island fur seal hunt under way, and Aleut hunters taking about 200 seals a day, the future of the North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty is unfortunately still in doubt.

A spokesman for Alaska's U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski said that the treaty was being held up in the Foreign Relations Committee until after the Senate recess. The compromise being hammered out in the last few weeks between those in favor of the treaty and the Humane Society and several wildlife groups would include some of the following changes:

- the elimination of the federal subsidy for the hunt;
- confining the hunt to subsistence purposes only;
- a reduction in the harvest to 15,000 seals, a figure arrived at by allocating 20 seals per Pribilof Islander; and
- a demand by the Humane Society and its allied groups that the pelts of the harvested seals not be sold or used for any commercial purposes; this would, in effect, amount to the majority of the pelts being wasted.

Those in favor of the treaty were willing to accept all but the last demand. Because no accord could be reached on the last demand, the compromise inten-

tionally left out any mention of how the pelts could be utilized. It was proposed that the decision be left to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The proposal which would require the U.S. Commerce Department to determine the number of seals taken and the fate of the pelts was questioned by Senator Murkowski. Murkowski said he did not want to "blindly enter into an agreement without assurances that the pelts would be utilized."

"To suggest that we vote on a treaty which does not clearly define what they can do with the pelts would be an injustice to the Pribilovians," Murkowski told the committee. "As a representative of the Pribilovians, it is my obligation to get this specific issue resolved. It is in their best interest to allow them to use the pelts in the way that is most beneficial to them," Murkowski added. "We have made several compromises on this treaty, but I don't intend to get stuck with an agreement without assurances from the Commerce Department that the Pribilovians can sell the pelts. What happens if we sign an agreement and then find out the Commerce Department will not let them sell the pelts? Rather than run that risk, I'd rather find out now, and then work for an agreement."

Murkowski said there are unofficial reports that Japan and Canada would not support the treaty unless they were assured they could receive a percentage of the pelts. "There is no basis for a treaty if there are no pelts to share with the other nations."

The fur seal treaty resulted from an international agreement

banning pelagic sealing between the United States, Japan, Canada and the Soviet Union. It was signed in 1911 when the fur seal population had declined to about 300,000. The fur seal treaty was approved in 1957 and the population is now estimated at about 1.1 million.

At the hearings, those testify-

ing in continued support of the treaty included Senator Ted Stevens; a representative of the Governor of Alaska; several Aleut leaders; representatives of the National Audubon Society, the Wildlife Management Institute, the World Wildlife Fund, and U.S. State Department.



Governor Bill Sheffield confers with two attorneys he hired personally to represent him during the current special session of the Alaska Legislature. They are John Conway of Anchorage, (at left) and Philip Lacovara of Washington, D.C. (right).