

Alaskans voice their opinions on subsistence

by Geoff Kennedy

for the Tundra Times

With few exceptions, testimony in the statewide subsistence teleconference earlier this month depended on ethnic backgrounds and geography. Close to 50 people testified in the four-hour teleconference held by the House Resources Committee March 10.

Former Dillingham legislator Nels Anderson called subsistence the birthright of all Native Alaskans.

"No Native Alaskan should be allowed to sell out his or her birthright and the birthright of their children and their children's children," he said.

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Anderson said he had advocated changing the Alaska Constitution by setting up a subsistence preference for rural Alaskans until something better came along. Something better did, he said: a house resolution introduced by Rep. Kay Wallis, D-Fort Yukon. Wallis proposes a constitutional amendment providing a Native preference.

In December, the state Supreme Court struck down the state rural preference subsistence law as unconstitutional, favoring rural residents over other Alaskans.

Many, such as Stan Bloom of Fairbanks, objected to any kind of subsistence preference.

"We're the injured parties," he said, "who are denied our constitutional rights."

Matt Rockwell of Kodiak agreed.

"The Alaska Constitution was set up to protect us from allowing a preference to anyone," he said. "I'm just as much an American as anyone else."

Bruce Baltor, representing the Bristol Bay Native Association, said the issue wasn't rural or Native, but a natural resources issue.

Andy Golia of Dillingham said a precedent already exists for setting up a privileged class of users of natural resources. Golia said the state limited entry law already does just that and has survived a number of court challenges over the years.

Golia said the increase in sports hunting in the Bristol Bay region has made subsistence living even harder to do in an area where jobs, cash and economic activity are already scarce.

Noel Woods, a member of the sportsmen's council in the Mat-Su area, opposed any change in the Alaska Constitution. He said the state should solve the problem by allowing Alaska Department of Fish and Game officials to set harvests in favor of rural residents and by improving the management of the state's forests.

Robert Willard, the president of the Southeast Native Subsistence Commission, said, "A Native priority will guarantee the continuation of the culture; a rural priority will not."

And William Miller of the Dot Lake Village Council said, "There is a physical and psychological need for

traditional and cultural foods."

Trudy Ward of the Dillingham Native Village Council said, "Our forefathers reared their families using game, fish and berries for food and medicine, also for clothing, housing and spiritual contentment."

Wayne Anthony Ross, vice president of the National Rifle Association, said his culture was as good as anyone else's. He said hunting has been a part of Western culture as far back as the days of Nimrod and Robin Hood. He said his family has had a long tradition of hunting as well, and four of his children have already hunted animals.

Ross called a subsistence preference "dangerous and divisive." He said it "sets Alaskans against Alaskans."

Paul Swetsof of the Alaska Native Coalition said the ANC had not formulated its position and offered his own.

"If Wayne (and those who agreed with his position) lost their hunting and fishing privileges, which I wouldn't want to see, it wouldn't affect their culture. It would kill ours; that's the difference. . . If I don't have a homeland to go to, I might as well commit suicide."

A number of people directed their anger at state officials and Gov. Steve Cowper for proposing constitutional amendments instead of challenging the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

Richard Bishop of Fairbanks complained, "It's a travesty that our government officials compromise, contravene and subvert the civil rights of all Alaskans."

But Cal Williams of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Anchorage said his friends in the NRA did not support Martin Luther King's quest for civil rights. He said the civil rights movement tried to protect the rights of oppressed minorities.

Williams said he understood subsistence laws as an attempt to allow Native Alaskans to participate in the economy of Alaska despite a shortage of cash.

"Native Alaskans did a pretty good job of stewardship of Alaska's resources," he said. After all, he said, it wasn't the Alaska Natives who polluted Prince William Sound.

But Sam McDowell of Anchorage, who challenged Alaska's subsistence

law all the way to the state Supreme Court, accused Alaska Natives of wasting caribou, of shooting walrus only for their tusks and of trading polar bear hides for drugs.

Several men claimed Native young people all want to get out of the villages instead of living in their culture. One said very few young Natives are left in the villages.

Supporters of the Native preference included Bill Thomas of the Southeast Native Subsistence Commission of

Ketchikan, Bruce Baltor of the Bristol Bay Native Association of Dillingham, Terry Hoeffler of the Bristol Bay Native Corp. in Dillingham and Mark Jacobs Jr. of Sitka.

Those who preferred a rural preference included: Joseph Chamalgrea of Nunam Kitlutsisti in Bethel, Dugan Nielsen of Choggiung in Dillingham and Luke Sampson, representing both the Northwest Arctic Borough and the NANA Regional Corp. in Kotzebue.