

Editorial



Subsistence meeting: April 10-11

Alaska Federation of Natives President Julie Kitka has announced that AFN will host a summit conference for the Alaska Native community to discuss the subsistence issue.

AFN notes that the theme, "Subsistence: Strategy for our Future," reflects the critical role of subsistence in the survival of Native cultures and village economies across the state.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of subsistence to Alaska Natives and the seriousness of the threat currently posed by the Alaska Supreme Court's recent decision, throwing the current subsistence preference into chaos.

The conference is set for April 10-11 at the Egan Convention Center in Anchorage. Kitka says she hopes the gathering will provide a forum to hear all views of Native groups throughout the state. In addition, Gov. Steve Cowper, members of the Bush Caucus of the Alaska Legislature and representatives from the U.S. Department of Interior will be invited to speak.

We believe this forum could set the tone for Native unity on the subsistence issue, an issue which has the potential to drive a wedge between people and groups.

Many different solutions are being debated. Among the most workable are changing the Alaska Constitution to call for a rural preference for subsistence and changing the constitution to call for a Native preference.

Among the worst ideas are those that would make subsistence a welfare program, basing eligibility on income levels, and attempting to call for hunting and fishing on weekdays, as if subsistence were a simple matter of deciding to go out and get a caribou on a given Thursday.

We believe that a solution to the subsistence issue will only come about if the Alaska Native community is solidly behind a position. This means unity, and it unquestionably will mean compromise on the part of some groups.

We commend AFN for calling this important meeting, and we urge people to send representatives to it. There are compelling arguments in favor of state and federal changes, just as there are compelling arguments for a rural and a Native preference.

What is needed is a lot of discussion. We have faith that Alaska Natives will argue, debate and consider alternatives, and then decide on a united stand.