

State will prosecute Native elders in Subsistence fishing dispute

COPPER CENTER--The State of Alaska will prosecute four elderly Copper River Natives for illegal subsistence fishing. The citations, issued about two weeks ago, sparked widespread protests in the Copper River valley, and Alaska's Department of Fish and Game at press time had not solved the original problem: how to divide a poor Copper River salmon run between local people and competing urban fishermen.

The youngest of the defendants in the fish-wheel citations is 62 years old; the eldest, 98. Many older citizens in the Copper River valley, both Native and non-Native, support themselves by fishing. The wheels of the fishermen who were cited have been chained and locked by Fish and Game Protection officers.

Although a Copper River salmon problem is not new, angry testimony by Native people at a meeting with Fish and Game officials on Wednesday, July 5, in Copper Center, revealed the intensity of their frustration.

The citations resulted from a decision by the Department to close fishing for all but two days of the week--Saturday and Sunday--in order to allow adequate escapement for spawning. The chosen days allow maximum access to urban fishermen, depriving local subsistence-dependent people an opportunity to fish under less competitive conditions.

A new law, passed in the closing days of this year's legislature but still on the Governor's desk waiting for his signature, sets clear priorities for the distribution of scarce fish and game resources. Customary and direct dependence on subsistence resources, local residency, and the availability of alternative food sources are the criteria to be used in allocating low populations of fish and game.

A speedy solution to the problem is vital, according to Judy Meidinger of the Copper River Native Association. In less

than two weeks, the hot weather and swelling fly population will make it difficult or impossible to dry the fish properly for winter use. Therefore, although the Department optimistically points to a long season of fishing ahead as an answer to subsistence users' needs, local fishermen feel that their real problems have been ignored.

Ahtna, Inc., the regional Native corporation for the Copper River valley, has retained an attorney to represent the four defendants. Local fishermen and their representatives also planned to meet with Interior Secretary Andrus during a rest stop in Copper Center on his Alaskan tour yesterday.

Commissioner Ron Skoog of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has expressed a willingness to continue working toward a solution to the Copper River salmon problem. In order to be satisfactory to local residents, the solution will have to include a change in the days open for fishing.