

Hovercraft project to start

By LAURY ROBERTS
Juneau Correspondent

As many as 26 villages along the Kuskokwim River and its tributaries in southwest Alaska may soon enjoy abated freight rates and expanded cargo service when a hovercraft demonstration project gets underway this summer.

Global Marine Development Corporation of Newport, California was chosen early this week to conduct the hovercraft experiment for at least one year. Hovercraft, which travel on a three-foot cushion of air over land or water, can carry several tons of freight, depending on its design.

"I see it as a complement to existing services," said Jesse Dodson, special assistant to Gov. Jay Hammond. "It won't replace air taxi, but it's a logical extension of that service. Hovercraft service would increase supply lines and the freight service. It may not reduce the

cost of freight, but it will keep it from getting worse and reduce the need for so much storage.

The transportation project has taken 2½ years and two acts of Congress to approach implementation. The state Department of Education came across the hovercraft idea during investigation of alternatives for transporting bush students to school. The department discarded the hovercraft mode as too unfamiliar, but turned its information over to the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT).

"It was felt the state of the art was there, along with the possibility of improving things (for the bush)," Dodson said.

A five-year exemption from the Jones Act, which prohibits the use of foreign-built hulls in American waters, was secured from Congress. And, Congress awarded Alaska \$1 million for the project through the Urban Mass Transit Administra-

tion, combined with a \$400,000 state appropriation.

The hovercraft is a somewhat rare animal. The largest fleet of the amphibious transporters is in the Midwest, according to John
(See HOVER, Page 12)

● Hovercraft

(Continued from Page 5)

Bates, director of research and development for DOT. There are only 26 hovercraft in the world available for commercial purposes, he said. While a pair of hovercraft has worked successfully on the MacKenzie River Delta in the Northwest Territories, only one private enterprise in England has made a profit operating hovercraft.

The intent of the project is to see if it's cost-effective," said Bates. "It takes the risk of developing those figures from private enterprise. From every indication, it looks like the use of hovercraft is economically viable."

While hovercraft could deliver bulkier freight to villages, lessening the need for more roads and larger airports, the possible detrimental effects of the system cannot be predicted. The departments of Environmental Conservation and Fish and Game have questioned whether use of the hovercraft will disrupt wilderness ecosystems. Bates hopes a report of the environmental facets of the operation will come out of the project.

The selection of Global Marine by DOT commissioner, Bob Ward, was predicated on a ranking point system. Consideration was given to the type of craft proposed for use, the availability of adequate maintenance and personnel, management experience of the six competing firms, and the amount of support garnered from river communities.

Bates said a public hearing on the proposal will be held in Bethel in mid-May.