

# Visa-free travel to Russia for Aleuts awaits approval

The State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service approved a request by Senator Ted Stevens which would allow Aleuts to travel without visas between Alaska and Russia.

The arrangement, which must still be approved by the Russian government, would enable Aleuts to join a program already enjoyed by Natives of the Bering Straits region who travel visa-free to Russia to

visit relatives and attend cultural events.

The Bering Straits region won this opportunity during negotiations with the former Soviet Union in 1989. Aleuts were not included at that time in the program because Kamchatka was still a closed zone. In a letter to Secretary of State Warren Christopher earlier this year, Stevens said, "With the opening of the Kamchatka Peninsula to for-

eigners in 1991 the time to consider the Aleuts is now."

In contacting the Administration, Stevens acted upon a request by Father George Pletnikoff of St. Paul. In 1993, Father Pletnikoff traveled to Kamchatka for the 250th anniversary of the city of Petropavlovsk, Kamchatskii. During his travels, he met with a number of Aleuts who expressed a desire to renew cultural ties with their relatives in Alaska.

He then contacted Senator Stevens for assistance.

"I see no reason for Russia not to comply with this request," said Stevens. "President Yeltsin and I participated just last year in ceremonies marking the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Alaska and the Aleut people. I believe he understands the importance of our people building upon longstanding relationships."

In his letter to Secretary Christopher, Stevens noted the long history between Russia and Alaskan Aleuts. He described Governor Baranof's forcing of Aleuts into service for the

Russian America Company, and the fact that many Aleuts were educated in the Russian Empire and later returned to Alaska as navy captains, Orthodox priests, teachers, diplomats and even a Governor.

"With the increasing communication between our two regions, it is extremely important that we nurture those relationships which are based on ancient cultural and familial ties," Stevens wrote Christopher. "The Aleuts are just such a connection. Many have a desire, as practitioners of the Russian Orthodox faith, to reestablish spiritual ties as well."