

State seeks control of marine mammals

By Associated Press and staff

Native subsistence hunters of marine mammals who now are allowed unlimited takes would come under state control under a plan submitted by the state to take over control of marine mammals in the state.

Gov. Bill Sheffield announced last week that the state is seeking to regain control of the management of marine mammals because federal management has been less than adequate.

Sheffield has said he will ask the Alaska Legislature for \$1.2 million to finance the management plan.

State management would have to allow sport hunting of the species except in times of shortages of the game, because the state is not allowed to limit game resources to a specific ethnic group. It also may allow non-Natives to possess raw ivory which now can only be possessed by Natives.

Raw ivory also could be sold to non-Natives under the plan but such sales would be limited to the Alaska ivory industry.

The species, representing about a third of the marine mammals off Alaska's coasts, are polar bear, walrus, sea otter, sea lion, beluga whale and harbor, spotted, ringed, ribbon and bearded seals.

State management of the species ended in 1972 with the passage of the federal Marine Mammals Protection Act. The state has been trying to regain management since 1973, and successful return is within reach, according to Fish and Game Commissioner Don Collinsworth.

He said several accomplishments over the years, such as maintenance of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, the conduct of the state's coordination and research program and passage of congressional amendments to the act all support the state's contention that this is the right time to pursue return of management.

Among the advantages of state management, he said, is a more active research and management program as well as

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State control would stimulate economy

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the chance to resolve disputes stemming from conflicts between fisheries and marine mammal resources.

"With state management, we would be able to view fisheries, shellfish and marine mammals as an entire ecosystem, rather than try to manage each species separately.

Don Mitchell, an attorney who also is executive vice-president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, said AFN has no stated position one way or the other on the matter as long as the interests of Native subsistence hunters are protected.

Mitchell said he hasn't seen or discussed the latest management plan but he felt the 1981 amendments to the Marine Management Protection Act, which, presumably the

state would seek to comply with, "in my judgment, satisfy AFN's goals."

Mitchell said he understands the proposal requires that before non-Native hunters are allowed to hunt the marine mammals, the Fish and Game department must offer the hunt opportunities and guiding opportunities to village residents in the immediate area.

The 1981 congressional amendment was aimed at assuring that any economic benefit from the hunt be turned over to the rural Alaska Native residents if at all possible, said Mitchell.

"Congress said, 'If we are to create an economic opportunity in that area, for God's sake let it go to the people who really need it.'"

If the fish and game officials feel that the local res-

idents can't or won't take the adequate number of the specific animal, they can then go out and offer the hunt or guide opportunity to non-Native, non-area residents, he said.

According to a Fish and Game issue paper, \$1.8 million per year could be accrued to subsistence users. That would include an estimated \$693,000 to walrus guides, \$650,000 per year from hide sales, and \$475,000 per year for polar bear guides.

Critics contend a state takeover will increase the number of regulations governing the mammals and several villages have sent resolutions to the governor opposing the move.

"It will increase the operating budget by about \$1 million a year," Sheffield said. "But I'm convinced the state does need to take over the act to

manage those species of mammals for better production and use by Alaskans."

The sea otter, for example, has been blamed for depleting once valuable crab fisheries around Cordova and Kodiak, the governor said.

"There seems to be a pretty high consensus there needs to be some control so they don't eat all the fish and crabs in the area," Sheffield said. "Just what that would call for I don't know at this point."

The governor's go-ahead sets in motion a many-tiered process that may take as long as a year before final management authority is regained. Lew Pamplin, director of the Division of Game, which would have primary responsibility for the management program, explained that the process will include extensive public meetings with an emphasis on coastal communities in the state. The first step will be submission of the state's applica-

tion to the Departments of Interior and Commerce, he said, followed by a scientific hearing to determine the biological status and optimum population ranges for the 10 species.

A second round of hearings, Pamplin said, will be held throughout the state to get the public's ideas on the kind of management program they want, and to ask their comments and suggestions on management regulations that should be adopted by the Board of Game.

Although the governor has requested a \$1.2 million budget for the program, it is possible that the entire amount would not be spent in the first year. The department currently budgets \$343,000 for the program, which is conducted by four marine mammal biologists and receives most of its operating money from research contracts with the federal government.