

Subsistence:

Murkowski says avoid changes at federal level

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, said last week that a change in the Alaska Constitution — not a change in federal law — is the answer to the state's current subsistence dilemma.

During an interview at his office in Anchorage recently, Murkowski said he's waiting to hear more from Alaskans about the difficult issue before he decides on specifics. And he said Alaskans have to figure out what the focus of the issue is before anything can be resolved.

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Murkowski talked about two sides of the issue.

The first is the issue of changing the State Constitution. A State Supreme Court's ruling recently said that under the current subsistence law the words "rural preference" discriminate against urban Alaskans.

The second issue, according to Murkowski, is the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, which requires a subsistence preference for rural Alaskans.

If ANILCA is changed, there is a possibility of federal takeover of fish and game management.

"The Supreme Court's ruling creates a very difficult situation for all Alaskans. To resolve that situation, we will need to strike a balance between the constitutional entitlement of equal access to fish and game resources and providing a subsistence preference to those Alaskans who traditionally have relied upon fish and game for their subsistence," Murkowski said.

"It is also critically important to maintain the state's sovereign authority to manage fish and game resources in the state.

"A federal takeover of fish and game management in Alaska, in my view, is completely unacceptable," Murkowski said in a prepared statement.

"Changing the State Constitution seems to be the drift of the general consensus. But the drift of opening the ANILCA amendment would have to be done in one voice," Murkowski said.

There are so many different opinions about which would be the best way to solve the disputes over who

gets subsistence preference or how the resource will be managed, that Murkowski said he thinks the difficulty lies within the focus of the issue.

"We can only meet this challenge if we work together with an abiding respect for the right of all citizens and deep concern for the welfare of current and future generations of fellow Alaskans. This issue has the potential to carve ugly divisions among interest groups in our state," he said in the statement.

"The state must again face this difficult problem... developing a scheme that provides for the needs of those Alaskans critically dependent upon fish and game for their nutritional and cultural needs, maintains continuity of state management of fish and game on federal lands as well as state and private lands, and meets the demands of sport and commercial users of fish and game resources," the statement continued.

Murkowski urged Alaskans to decide how this is going to be resolved.

Murkowski also discussed the proposed Joint Commission on Policies and Programs Affecting Alaska Natives, which failed last year. He noted it is still being stalled by Congressman George Miller, D-California.

Murkowski doesn't know when Miller will change his mind, but expects the congressman has some changes or additions to the bill he wants to make.

"If we cannot obtain a bill satisfactory to Alaska Natives, we may explore the idea of a presidential commission resembling what we have tried to do in the Congress," Murkowski

said.

And he also pointed out that \$300,000 has already been appropriated to establish the commission.

The senator also discussed the Indian Health Service budget, which was about \$1 billion in Fiscal Year 1989 and about \$1.2 billion in FY '90.

The Senate Select Commission on Indian Affairs this year is requesting about \$1.7 billion, and that request will go to the Senate budget panel.

Part of this will be aimed at addressing serious mental health problems as well as drug and alcohol abuse problems, which are prevalent in Lower 48 Indian communities as well as Alaska Native communities.

"A bill I co-sponsored to establish a demonstration grant program for community-based mental health projects, including substance abuse, has passed the Senate and a hearing is now scheduled in the House," Murkowski said.

"This bill, S. 1270, would authorize \$6 million a year for each of the next three years for such projects," he said.

These would be community based mental health facilities combining traditional as well as conventional methods of healing.

"The whole family would be there, they could help support each other," Murkowski said.

Another issue Murkowski discussed during a press conference held just before the interview, was about the Tongass National Forest.

Murkowski said environmentalists are trying to close the forest from

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—Sen. Frank Murkowski

timber use even though Congress has made it clear that certain sensitive lands will be strictly protected, especially around streams where there are anadromous fish.

He said the worry that people have about opening Tongass is of the land being clear cut. Murkowski said there is no way this would happen.

Besides having concerns about the land and water at Tongass, there is also the matter of the amount of money the federal government will spend on Tongass timber.

"For every dollar the government spends on Tongass, timber will make \$1.41 back, and that won't just be a check for the pulp mills," he said.

"We can manage it as a crop and resource."

Murkowski said he expects the Tongass issue to be voted on this session.