

Oil spill prompts test of Chenega seafood quality

by **Jennifer Gordon**

Tundra Times reporter

State officials have suggested villages affected by oil spill perform a "sniff test" to determine if seafoods are contaminated. But many villagers have turned up their noses at the idea and have asked for chemical testing of the food.

Dr. Robert Wolfe, research director for the Division of Subsistence,

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● Food tests start

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Alaska Department of Fish and Game, said a food testing program has started in the villages of Chenega Bay, Tatitlek, Port Graham and English Bay to find out if subsistence foods in those areas can be utilized.

Wolfe said the human nose is sensitive to hydrocarbons and the organoleptic test, which involves looking, smelling, touching and tasting a small sample of the food has been found reliable in the past.

"If it looks, smells and tastes OK, it's most probably safe," Wolfe said.

Several villagers have not accepted that sniffing the food is reliable. Wolfe said eagles have been found dead after eating oiled animals on the beach and villagers wonder why they should be able to detect the oil if the animals can't. To put the question to rest, Wolfe said, both chemical and organoleptic tests are being done on the samples taken from the villages.

A researcher has been set up in each village with a locally hired food sampler and teams to gather the samples. Wolfe said the first phase will involve taking samples of salmon, halibut and butter clams in areas close to the villages that look free of oil.

Samples from the villages are being sent to Seattle and Washington D.C. for testing. Wolfe said the chemical tests are expensive, with a single batch of clams costing as much as \$600 to test. That is one reason, he said, officials are anxious to find out if the nose can sense small levels of hydrocarbon.

So far, the expenses that have accumulated from the food testing project have been paid by different agencies, Wolfe said. ADF&G has set up an account, he said, that state officials will ask Exxon for a reimbursement at a later time.

Wolfe said VECO Inc. and Exxon have hired people to help with the food testing and have given Kenai Borough funding that has been used for testing in Port Graham and English Bay. Most of the lab work is being done by the Food and Drug Administration.

The Alaska Native Medical Center has also gotten involved through its Environmental Health and Engineering Branch. Steve Corp, chief of Environmental Services, said his office is primarily a coordinator of information from ADF&G, FDA and North Pacific Rim.

Corp said that there has never been an oil spill that has posed the possibility of contamination to a people's food source, and no one has looked at the long-term results of eating food with hydrocarbons in it.

Wolfe said it will take another month before results come back from the chemical tests, but that doesn't help in the short-term. To alleviate the villages' dependency on Exxon food shipments and other outside sources, Wolfe said requests have been made by the villages to ADF&G to harvest food in areas untouched by the oil spill. Tatitlek requested special subsistence rights in the Copper River Flats and Chenega Bay requested rights for an area north of Evans Island, where the community is located.