

Ft. Yukon builds dikes

It's a race against winter in Ft. Yukon to avoid potential disaster. Villagers are working to build dikes to prevent possible spring erosion of the Yukon River near their tank farm, holding the town's fuel supply.

The \$1 million project to build 9 dikes was contracted by the Soil Conservation Service to Osborne Construction, a Fairbanks company, which has hired 20 people from the village. The company is leasing equipment from the city of Fort Yukon. Both actions have given a boost to the local economy.

"I watched the bank fall into the river this year," First Chief Clarence Alexander of the Native village of Ft. Yukon says. "Undercurrents would cut underneath the bank and then it caves in."

"We have underground water pipes along the river that would

have to be relocated, and more erosion of the bank would mean the loss of homes, streets, and other public utilities. It would cost a lot more to move the tanks, and we wouldn't know where to move them to," Alexander adds.

The Native village of Ft. Yukon coordinated with the city of Ft. Yukon and the Gwitchya Zhee Corp. to sponsor the project.

"To move the tank farm was more than \$3 million," says Barry Wallis, executive director of the Native Village. "And at last year's erosion rates, we would have to relocate residents. People are super-reluctant to move. The whole community was moved once, and that caused a lot of pain and suffering," Wallis says.

Wallis doubted this protect would be undertaken so quickly. "I thought they were just talking,

making promises," says Richard Carroll. He and his wife Eva's lot extended 120 feet behind their house at one time, but now is within 40 feet of the riverbank. They lost 60 feet this year.

Known as "the people of the river," Athabascans take pride in knowing the river and were consulted in project design.

"We read water," Chief Alexander says. "We have knowledge of how these rivers function, and we should be working partners to use this knowledge. We respect the river. It's our livelihood, our corridor and our transportation."

Pat Stanley, administrator for the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments in the Yukon Flats, says those who work with Native villages must understand values the people have and their prob-

lems.

The Yukon is a prime salmon fishing stream. Next spring, a likely time the tanks would topple into the river, King, Chum and Chinook salmon will be in a passive out migration to the Bering Sea.

Susan Peter, sub regional director of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, Inc. is concerned about protecting the village and helping the local economy.

"In the past, our economy was based on furs. That is on the decline. No local crews were needed to fight fires this year, either. So we were very pleased to have the construction company use our data bank to hire workers from this area," she says.

Chief Alexander agrees. "I grew up out in the bushes, hunting, fishing, making snowshoes,



Chief Clarence Alexander stands in front of the Ft. Yukon fuel tanks.

(Lynn Betts, SCS photo)

and living off the land until I was 20 years old," he says. "About 80 percent of our community is on a subsistence lifestyle, so we're grateful for a project that brings cash to the community."