

Northwestern Natives Displeased with AVEC

By JAMES EDE

SELAWIK — The once helpful, friendly animal that promised an improved way of life to Alaska's Native villages has grown into a man-eating monster. This animal of such promise, AVEC (Alaska Village Electric Cooperative) has become a bureaucracy which now devours the people it was designed to help.

When the Alaska state rural legislators made a deal to fund AVEC to help provide power to the villages, they did not know what their subsidy plan would eventually do.

Instead of subsidizing the public utility in the normal manner by direct government subsidy, the state allowed the subsidy, to be made indirectly from educational funds.

Each village had a BIA or state-operated school which would have to pay originally \$2400 a month and subsequently increased to \$2835. This monthly payment is the same in January and June alike, no matter how many kilowatts are used whether the school is a one teacher school or a 10-teacher school.

There was no guarantee that AVEC would provide consistent service and schools and private consumers alike paid for service they did not receive.

The rate for the individual consumer in the village is seven times the rate for consumers elsewhere and for the school it can be 10 to 30 times higher especially in the summer months when no power is being used and the \$2835 is still paid each month.

In one community there are two schools. The private school which uses twice the power, pays half the price of the public school.

This is clear discrimination and an unfair practice apparently upheld by the Public Utilities Commission, appointed by the governor, whose members are obviously biased in favor of AVEC and do not recognize the consumers' rights.

These friends walk out of commission meetings with their friends from the AVEC board after ignoring the consumers' complaints of unfair treatment.

One of the biggest problems of AVEC is undoubtedly mismanagement. No wonder costs are exorbitant to the poor consumer. There is little or no maintenance with a band-aid approach. The local AVEC employees are poorly trained and so poorly paid it is difficult to hire competent people for this highly responsible job.

The village plant operators do not have spare parts on hand and in the unusual event that an AVEC maintenance man is sent in for repairs long overdue, he is not allowed to bring parts with him.

There is much waste of time and money because of a lack of coordination and direction from AVEC officials. The traveling employees of AVEC have a high turnover rate and apparently are underpaid and leave a long trail of bad checks in the villages.

Safety precautions by AVEC are few. There is little fire protection. AVEC plants are often too close to oil tanks. There are no dikes around oil tanks set on the tundra and frequent oil spills are ignored. The plants are not grounded, which interferes with radio communications for the village people.

Nearly every AVEC powered village in Alaska has a sad story to tell. In one village a large generator sat for a year not hooked up. Then AVEC complained the village had overloaded the for-

mer generator which was too small.

In another village AVEC refused to hook up the village until the SOS school signed a discriminatory contract, thus the whole village could not use a recently installed sewer system.

In many villages power goes off, schools freeze up, pipes are broken, motors are burned out in freezers, furnaces and other appliances, but AVEC is not responsible.

Many villages are growing and AVEC has had advance warning of the need for larger power plants. Their negligence in meeting the needs in time has caused much loss including fires, destruction of property, slow down and stoppage of construction projects, loss of school property, time and many personal damages to village people.

AVEC has no responsibility but everyone must pay their bills whether service is received or not. People are frequently billed for bills they have already paid, and when bills have been paid twice credit has not been received.

When complaints are made by village officials AVEC retaliates with reprisals. One village power plants were not repaired for 10 days last summer causing everyone in the village to lose all their summer meat supplies.

When an AVEC official arrives in a village he demands an immediate meeting with a city council. Then he proceeds to raise hell and treat the council as if they were stupid swearing and name-calling.

An official threatened one council with triple damages if anything happened to the generator he knew was overloaded and had had a year's notice to increase the demand for power.

AVEC has played favorites and sent mechanics to one village as a priority over another village to hook up power for a smaller village with a new high school being constructed for 10 students, while the high school with 115 students was bypassed.

This type of discrimination and treatments of AVEC bureaucrats is untenable to the people of rural Alaska. Threats and verbal abuse are not acceptable ways of dealing with any human beings.

No village names are mentioned here due to AVEC's system of reprisals. But many people in rural Alaska are extremely upset that the system is allowed to continue and demand that some action be taken against AVEC to protect the consumer and insure fair treatment to rural Alaskan power users.

Someone somewhere should care about the people of our village and many others are being exploited and cheated by AVEC. If the people of Alaska don't take action soon, the damages will increase and the discrimination continues and once again

a voice cries in the wilderness, "Let there be light." Villages should not have to live in darkness and cold while AVEC mismanagement runs rampant.

A legislative investigation should be made of AVEC and its insufficient unfair operation. The Tundra Times is urged to call for this investigation on behalf of victimized village people who are paying exorbitant rate for lousy service.

When the people who can least afford the high power rates must pay so much more for inferior service, there is a need for action and reform of this utility.