

St. Lawrence Islanders unhappy with cleanup plan

by Jim Benedetto

Tundra Times Editor

Officials of the Savoonga Native Village Corporation on St. Lawrence Island say they required the Army Corps of Engineers to hire local guides for their own protection from the unsafe terrain.

"It would be suicide," said George Noongwook, vice president of the corporation, who cited drifting snow, high winds, sub-zero temperatures and polar bears as some of the hazards Corps personnel might face along the 70-mile trail from Savoonga to the clean-up sites.

Noongwook said that articles appearing in both Anchorage daily newspapers made it appear as if Natives on St. Lawrence were "making big bucks," when in reality, the guides supplied snowmobiles, boats sleds, food, fuel and other necessities for the trips. "I don't think \$300 a day for that kind of service is unreasonable," Noongwook said.

The guiding fee was split equally between the Native corporation and

the guides, said Noongwook.

The Corps is charged with the responsibility of cleaning up abandoned military sites at Northeast Cape. The materials left behind by the military include PCB's, asbestos, contaminated tars and soils, and thousands of barrels containing human waste; solid waste such as old structures, pipes and concrete are also present at the sites.

Noongwook criticized the \$6.75 million plan, as it proposes removal of only the most hazardous waste from the island, and burial of the rest, including asbestos and the barrels of human waste.

Edna Apatiki, vice president of Sivuaq, the Gambell Native corporation, said that Gambell residents were shocked to find that the Corps was planning to bury asbestos and other materials very near to their primary water supply. Initially, the Corps was reluctant to share their plans or information with the residents, and did so only at the insistence of officials from the village corporations.

The two corporations, which own 100 percent of the surface and subsur-

face of the island, say that they must be compensated if hazardous and solid waste is to be buried on their property, or better still, that all of it be removed from the island.

Noongwook defended the corporations' controversial visitors fees, ranging from \$25 for tourists to \$600 for ivory traders, which are required for anyone wishing to travel outside the island's two villages. The Corps is exempt from those fees.

"What people don't seem to understand," says Noongwook, "is that St. Lawrence Island is all private land...As private landowners, we are liable if someone gets hurt or killed on our land...this is a suing society."

"In Anchorage, if landowners build a fence and keep people out, or charge a fee to get in for some service, nobody says anything about that."

The St. Lawrence Island corporations did not share in the \$962.5 million other village and regional corporations received under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).