

# Pribilof seal harvest gains support

One U.S. senator called it subsidization of a blood industry. Another called it a classic wildlife management success story. With the extremes drawn, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week began studying the fur seal treaty which provides for the seal harvest on St. Paul Island.

The committee was considering an amendment to the treaty that would honor commitments to Japan and Canada, but stop the harvest for U.S. markets. Under the treaty, first negotiated in 1911, fur seals are harvested on St. Paul Island with 70 percent of the furs going to U.S. markets and 15 percent going to each of

the other two countries. In return, Japan and Canada agreed to stop pelagic sealing, hunting seals in open water.

The committee was scheduled to vote on the amendment Tuesday, however, support mustered by Alaska Senators Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski led to a postponement

until May 12.

Late last week Stevens reported he and Murkowski had met with Secretary of State Alexander Haig and according to the two, Haig indicated the administration supported the treaty as it currently stands.

The present treaty calls for taking between 24,000 and

28,000 bachelor bull fur seals each year. Should the 70 percent cutback occur, it would reduce the number of seals taken to about 8,000.

With that reduction would come a comparative loss of income for the people who work the harvest. Larry Mercurieff, (Continued on Page 20)

# ● Seal harvest

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president of Tanadgusix, the St. Paul village corporation, told Congress the seal hunt provides about 73 percent of the employment on the island and the cutback would cause a severe depression in St. Paul. He said the seal harvest was the village's sole industry.

Also at stake is the health of the fur seal herd. Since the original signing of the treaty the seals have returned from a population of about 300,000 after years of indiscriminate pelagic hunting, to an estimated 1.7 million. The management theory behind the increase is that the careful selection of bachelor bulls protects cows, pups and the beachmaster breeding bulls. Assuming they cared which they were taking, it would be difficult for pelagic sealers to distinguish among the various categories in the open water.

Still, conservationists who also are attempting to stop the

harvest of harp seals off the east coast of Canada, say they U.S., supporting its own seal hunt, has little chance of stopping that eastern harvest.

Even conservation groups seem divided on the issue. In the recent hearings, the National Wildlife Federation has supported the present treaty. Friends of Animals, however, took out a full-page ad in the Washington Post last week in favor of the amendment to stop or curtail the hunt. Two other large groups, the Sierra Club and Audubon Society have yet to be heard.

Congressional observers said if the vote had been held as scheduled, the cutback probably would have passed, however, Stevens said with support from the administration, the Alaska Republicans has a good chance of changing at least some committee member's minds. There are nine republicans on the committee and eight Democrats.