

Secretary Hickel Signs Transfer of Reindeer Ownership to Mekoryuk

The largest reindeer herd in the United States changed hands today when the federal government transferred ownership of some 10,000 animals to the Eskimo residents of Mekoryuk, a small village on Nunivak Island off southwest Alaska.

Signing of the title papers by Secretary of Interior Walter J. Hickel marked the close of several months of negotiations between Mekoryuk council members and federal officials.

"Reindeer have been on our

island since 1920," a council spokesman said, "Now for the first time we have something to say about managing them."

"The transfer," Secretary Hickel said, "will permit the people of Nunivak to participate more directly in the growth of the red meat industry of Alaska."

"The arrangement," he added, "provides maximum management control to the people of Nunivak."

The Nunivak reindeer make up the largest single herd among

Alaska's 30,000 animals. The majority of the deer are located on the mainland along the Bering Sea coast and are owned by individual Eskimos.

Up to now, the Nunivak reindeer have been owned and managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who also operate a slaughtering and processing plant on the island.

Since 1927 from one-third to one-half of the total reindeer meat processed in Alaska has

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originated from this plant.

"The Reindeer Act of 1937 restricted ownership of deer to Alaskan Natives," the Mekoryuk spokesman said. "Up to a few months ago we didn't even know there was such an Act."

The BIA has always employed villagers in the processing plant, and reindeer operations provide the main cash income to the residents.

The stated objectives of the government herd was to provide starter animals for new mainland herds, to provide herd management training, and to provide a source of income to the village.

"We feel that we can continue to fulfill these objectives through local management," a village resident said. "After all, we've served a 25-year apprenticeship."

Under terms of the new contract, Mekoryuk will receive ownership of the reindeer. The building, corrals, and other real property will be renovated within the next five years and then transferred to the village.

The new owners will receive the same types of assistance rendered the BIA during its tenure. The State of Alaska will continue to provide slaughter inspection and animal husbandry assistance; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

will conduct range capacity surveys; and the BIA will provide financial support and operational advice.

Special assistance in training, marketing, bookkeeping—and if necessary, financing—will be provided by the Community Enterprise Development Corporation (CEDC).

On the request of the Mekoryuk Village Association, CEDC personnel helped council members to negotiate terms of the contract.

The non-profit, private corporation provides technical and financial assistance to rural community-owned enterprises.

Responsibility for management, marketing, herding and slaughtering operations rest with the Village of Mekoryuk. The Village has also agreed to continue to make reindeer available to other Alaskan Natives for starter herds.

A reindeer committee will be formed to consult with, and advise, the village during the first three years of new management.

The committee will consist of six members: three from Mekoryuk, one representing the BIA, and one Alaskan citizen "knowledgeable in the reindeer industry."