

# WASHINGTON COMMENTS

Sen. Frank Murkowski



## FUR SEAL TREATY NEGOTIATIONS CONTINUE

The fur seal treaty is not doomed.

While it's true that we have reached an impasse in the negotiations, we have also made significant inroads towards resolving several important issues.

At this time the Senate is still negotiating on one basic, but very important issue - what Alaskans on the Pribilof Islands will be able to do with pelts after they have harvested the seals for their meat.

Because this remains unresolved, I recently called on the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to withhold action on the treaty. I firmly believe we can resolve this after the Senate reconvenes in September.

As proposed by opponents to the treaty, the U.S. Commerce Department would make the final decision of what could be done with the pelts.

I would be derelict in my duty to these Alaskans if I allowed this issue to remain in question before passage of the treaty. We have worked too hard to go forth with a potentially faulty treaty.

This year, the North Pacific Fur Seal Commission recommended that there be a harvest of 22,000 sub-adult bachelor male seals, a number based on scientific data. Increasing concern about the fur seal population decline has generated a great deal of controversy about the continued harvest. As a result, a proposed compromise to the treaty limits the seal harvest for the next four years to a subsistence level. Under this compromise, the Pribilovians could be denied the opportunity to sell the by-products of the harvest, i.e. the pelts.

This is where the compromise went too far. Not only is the harvest level severely cut back, but the Pribilovians could lose a valuable resource. They are in a critical period during which they are trying to diversify their economy from one based primarily on sealing to other sources of revenues such as fishing. Loss of the ability to sell the pelts would eliminate an important financial resource to help the residents during this transitional period.

The opponents to the treaty want the pelts to be buried so that no financial gain can come from the subsistence harvest. I see no logic in this rationale - it would be a waste of an important resource. If they are going to harvest the seals for their meat, why shouldn't they be able to sell the pelts?

I am willing to agree that there be federal oversight to ensure that no seals in excess of subsistence needs are taken. Oversight or audits would eliminate the argument of the opponents that the incentive for killing seals is for the pelt value and not for their meat.

In the meantime, the Pribilovians are being allowed a subsistence harvest under regulations issued by the Department of Commerce.

But until I receive assurances that the Pribilovians will be allowed to market the pelts, I am not prepared to allow a vote on the treaty. In the meantime, the treaty is not "dead." It just needs a little more work.