

Biologists sow seeds of mistrust

A dozen Fish and Game Department biologists, led by the head of the Game Department director Ron Sommerville, last week took unpaid personal leave from their jobs to spend time campaigning to repeal the state subsistence law.

Their actions have been resoundingly criticized by state officials ranging from Gov. Jay Hammond to U. S. Congressman Don Young.

Those officials criticized the biologists—who are supposed to be impartial scientists—for getting involved in this volatile election proposition—which is a political issue.

When the biologists made their leap into the political arena they loudly complained that they feared their step might place the Department of Fish and Game in jeopardy because of powerful legislators who support subsistence. These legislators, said the biologists, would take out their wrath at the biologists on the department and cut funds for game management.

We think that the biologists are barking up the wrong tree if they are trying to point a finger of blame for potential harm done the department by this stand.

Those people who support the state subsistence law and oppose its repeal also recognize that preservation of the subsistence lifestyle is best done by careful management of the fish and game resources.

They recognize that prudent management cannot be done by a department suffering lack of funding.

We thus find the biologists' allegations to be a straw dog tossed out to gain more support for the anti-subsistence side.

We do believe, however, that the harm to be done by the biologists' stand will come from the seeds planted by the biologists—seeds of mistrust.

Rural residents have long doubted the motivations of department game wardens and department employees. This will do nothing to help rural confidence in the department's intentions.

The biologists have placed the Department in a no-win situation no matter what the outcome of this repeal vote.

Let's say the law is repealed and game allocation is left to the discretion of biologists as they say they want. Who will actually trust them to carry out their duties in an even-handed scientific manner? We would have a hard time in believing their good intentions.

And if the law fails and the biologists return to their jobs it will be very difficult for them to maintain the cloak of scientific impartiality that they are supposed to have as biologists.

One of the strengths that scientists have in their professions is that they are supposed to study facts without concern for the political ramifications of their findings.

The actions of the biologists have placed the motivations and reputation of the entire department into question.

This is not something anyone would have wished for, but it has come.

The Fish and Game department will be a long time in living down the effects.