

After three wet months, Selawik votes dry

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After three months of being "wet" Selawik residents have had enough of the effects of liquor on their village and last month voted to go dry again.

Domestic violence increased in the normally sleepy village east of Kotzebue, school attendance dipped and violent crimes shot off the chart.

State troopers say that during a 17-day period in early August, a 22-year-old man who had been drinking was wounded when he pointed a rifle at officers after taking a potshot at another villager.

In the month's first days, troopers made 28 arrests, compared to 35 for the first six

months of the year.

"The crime rate skyrocketed," says trooper 1st Sergeant Tim Litera. "It was so dramatic, the changes — it was fantastic."

"I had to physically take a shotgun from under a guy's jaw just after I got there. He was intoxicated. There was an old lady there that I thought he had assaulted or hurt. I calmed her down and she says in broken English, 'We have to go dry again.' It really stuck with me."

The village of 600 was one of the first to ban the sale and importation of alcohol after the state in 1980 allowed small communities to control liquor

at a local level. But Selawik repealed the measure in July, and the trouble started.

After barely three months, the old woman got her wish. Selawik became the first village to first abolish, then reinstitute the ban.

In tiny villages scattered across Alaska's remote reaches alcohol abuse is seen as the leading public health problem, and some 60 hamlets have wielded the state's complex "local option" law to deal with the menace.

Health officials say while the state has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation, rural Alaska's is even higher. Alcohol is seen as a major con-

tributing factor.

Rabeau says 60 percent of the accidental deaths in rural Alaska can be attributed to liquor, as can the rising incidence of alcohol-related diseases.

Troopers say liquor and violence go hand-in-hand in remote areas. Despite the problems it brings, some villages continue to flirt with liquor.

Kiana, a village of about 360 on the Kobuk River in northwest Alaska, has voted to lift its 18-month ban on liquor sales and importation as of Dec. 1. Mayor Larry Westlake said bootlegging made the ban difficult to enforce.

Similar prohibitions at

White Mountain, east of Nome, and Kivilina, on the Chukchi Sea, northwest of Kotzebue, also fell in recent elections.

The 3-year-old law allows rural communities to deal with liquor in one of four ways.

Residents can petition to vote to ban the sale and importation of alcohol, ban just the sale, opt for a community-run liquor store or allow liquor sales under special liquor licenses.

While figures kept by various state agencies often don't jibe, it appears that about 60 of Alaska's 208 villages have adopted the most stringent of the four liquor-control methods.