

MUKTUK LEADS TO FOOD STUDY

State Health Officials To Consult with TT Native Foods Committee

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"Alice's Restaurant" never had so many problems with local authority as Tundra Times's small booth at the Tanana Valley State Fair. Classed as an "itinerant restaurant" by the State, the newspaper's booth hoped to serve small tidbits of muktuk, hors d'oeuvre size, to the general public.

Field supervisor for the state's Division of Environmental Health Ken Torgerson initially turned down the request to sell muktuk on the basis that the "muktuk is inherently unsafe," and was a possible source of botulism and salmonella bacteria.

This week the Regional Health Officer for the northern region centered in Fairbanks, Dr. Paul Frith reviewed the results of a laboratory test made by the state lab on a sample of the muktuk to be sold.

The sample was found to be entirely free of either salmonella, staph, or clostridium bacteria which cause botulism. The test did reveal the presence of coliform organisms, common to ALL meats.

Coliform in large enough quantities can cause mild to

severe digestive disorders, the GI's cramps, fever, or whatever the body would do to throw off an infection. There are no standards set for the quantities of coliform allowable on ANY meat.

Coliform count has been used as a criteria for water sanitation. The amount allowable in drinking water is zero. In milk, 10 per c.c. Frith said the average sample of hamburger meat would be about 600 to 700.

The muktuk sample showed a count of 1200 per gram. The problem, from the state's point of view, centers around the fact that muktuk is generally eaten raw and receives no further processing. Another source, when quoted the statistics of the state's lab test, said the figures for the muktuk were "very good,

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very low for that type of test."

Frith could not give statistics on any other form of meat, fish, or fowl. The state has never tested smoked salmon that is sold in chain grocery stores, nor certain varieties of raw foods

available in local and state restaurants, such as raw fish served in Japanese restaurants, raw oysters, or a rare steak that can be had at just about any fine restaurant.

He explained the lack of standards to apply in the case of muktuk was not one of planned discrimination but of an unprecedented situation that had never before arisen.

Dr. Frith met with the entire Tundra Times staff to discuss the problems involved. "How do we get the government to correct the inequity that exists," he asked, "and I admit that one exists."

He recommended a six month or more testing program of not only muktuk, but ALL Native foods, so that new regulations could be formulated to cover any possible situation.

Tundra Times suggested that this program be extended to cover Alaskan foods, not Native only, taking into account the wild game and field dressing that is necessary in the procurement of such game.

An All-Alaskan dinner sponsored by a community club in Fairbanks last week was seeking donations of moose, caribou, etc. This is precisely the kind of situation not covered at the present time and is not a Native problem alone.

However, Tundra Times made it clear that if foods with an equal coliform count are now being served in other parts of the state it is blatantly unfair to single out Native foods and regulate solely against them.

After an intensive discussion, it was decided that Tundra Times would not sell the muktuk at the fair. Under present regulations, it is legal to GIVE it away and ask for donations.

Howard Rock, Tundra Times editor said "I think we will retain our booth and offer the muktuk for donations only."

"I think it's a real good idea to have our Native foods tested for quality. That could be a very good step for Native people as a whole. They can take pride in their foods."

Dr. Frith set aside the week of August 5th for his office to work with a committee selected by the Tundra Times to act as an advisory group on Native food

preparation and to present the Natives views on the issue.

Dr. Frith said he would go on record as saying; "I oppose the way we are set up now and I think there should be a change of standards."

He pledged to commit his regional office to the development of a program of testing and standard evaluations to be used in the future as guidelines that would hopefully open up the state to full appreciation of its heritage of Native foods.

Tundra Times "itinerant restaurant" may be temporary, but what endures long after the fair is over may affect food regulations in the state for a long time to come.