

Hepatitis program to be reassessed

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Indian Health Service (IHS) says it plans to reassess and improve its current hepatitis B screening and vaccination program in Alaska.

Hepatitis B, a cancer-causing virus, has reached epidemic proportions in some southwest Alaska villages in the Bethel area.

During a Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs hearing Thursday on extension of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, IHS Director Everett Rhoades said his agency is planning to meet early next year with Alaska and fed-

eral health authorities and scientists to discuss the agency's current program.

Rhoades also acknowledged the spread of the disease has reached epidemic levels, but that the planned three-year program would be adequate.

Sen. Frank Murkowski said testimony during a recent hearing in Anchorage indicated the current screening and vaccination plan for Alaska's hepatitis B program will take three years to complete.

He said many Alaska Natives who seem to be particularly susceptible to the disease could contract the virus in that time.

"You now acknowledge that

1,800 people could become infected with hepatitis B this year, yet you don't see the need to expedite the screening process and prevent new infections among Natives," Murkowski said.

The senator repeated a request that federal and state health officials consider contacting the Centers for Disease Control for assistance in testing blood.

Murkowski also asked if the IHS plans to conduct a mass screening program in Alaska schools this fall. Rhoades assured him a directive ordering the program would be sent out.