

Cowper says he supports sovereignty — to a point

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Gov. Steve Cowper supports sovereignty — up to a point.

In Bethel last week, Cowper explained why earlier this year he reversed the long-time state policy of refusing to recognize the tribal status of Alaska Native groups.

"We effectively got tired of talking out of both sides of our mouths," he said. "We certainly thought it was not a good idea to deny tribal status and then go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and say, 'Look, we were just kidding about that.'"

"In the past, the legal people have said you can't admit to anything; otherwise, the entire system will fall down on your head," Cowper said.

But Cowper decided tribal sovereignty doesn't threaten the state.

"I don't think that type of sovereignty envisioned by most Natives is going to threaten our system," Cowper said. Tribal sovereignty, for the most part, means little more than local control, a condition urban Alaskans support as well, he said.

Native communities have rights which have never been extinguished. The 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act settled only land claims and did not address tribal sovereignty at all, Cowper said.

Cowper supports local control of

alcohol and drug abuse programs as well.

"The kind of social problems here need to be addressed at a community level," he said. "Actually, if they're not addressed at a community level, they're likely not to be addressed at all."

But Cowper opposes Native sovereignty over fish and game. He says that it would lead to management on a "patchwork basis."

"I know people here in the Y-K Delta feel they can manage it themselves. They have good reasons to do so," he conceded.

"But fish and game migrate," he said. "They go across the dotted lines on a map, and somebody's got to call the shots from the standpoint of the species. That's what fish and game management is all about."

Cowper had planned to explain his position on sovereignty to the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce Nov. 12, but a blizzard that day stranded him in Juneau.

In his place, an attorney with the Native American Rights Fund, Robert Anderson, told the chamber that Native tribal organizations could take over road and airport maintenance, alcohol and drug abuse programs and even fish and game management.

When the weather cleared, Cowper flew to Bethel, where he toured the local high school and appeared on a call-in radio program.