

Villagers can handle their problems

From the Daily News—Miner

It seems hard to imagine that the Pennsylvania researchers hired by the North Slope Borough could overstate the alcohol problem in Alaska's rural communities, but they did—and the way they handled it was a disservice to all Alaskan Natives.

The message from the people of Barrow is that they realize alcohol abuse is a problem in their community and they are working on the problem very hard. We agree it's best handled by the people of Barrow themselves, and they deserve all the help they can get.

But sloppy "scientific research" doesn't help those efforts. The next time Barrow tries to attract an investment or sell municipal bonds for the kind of community improvements that can offset the effects of alcoholism their new reputation as being a town full of drunks won't help them in the financial community.

One step that will help all rural communities like Barrow is the bill passed recently by the state Senate providing stiffer penalties for bootlegging. The bill, SB 365, was introduced by Sen. Frank Ferguson of Kotzebue. It would make bootlegging a felony except for first offense, which would be a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$5,000 fine. It would also be a felony to make any sale or "exchange" of liquor to a minor, and convictions would bring up to five years in jail and a \$30,000 fine.

The bill may get even tougher when it's considered in the House. Rep. Nels Anderson of Dillingham said he will push amendments to require for forfeiture of airplanes and other vehicles used by bootleggers.

Such legislation is needed to put more teeth into the laws protecting communities that vote themselves "dry" but find they still can't keep booze away. Combined with more work on the "demand" side of the problem, people in communities like Barrow may some day hear quite different stories about what they did after they decided to fight alcoholism themselves.