

History of the subsistence hunting and fishing law: Part Two

(Editor's Note: This is part two of a series on the history of the state subsistence hunting law as interpreted by Nunam Kitlutsisti. Nunam Kitlutsisti is the environmental arm of the Association of Village Council Presidents, representing 56 Yupik Eskimo villages in the lower Yukon and Kuskokwim River area.)

THE HISTORY OF THE SUBSISTENCE HUNTING LAW 1975-1978

By Norman A. Cohen

A joint meeting of the local boards for January 21, 1977, in Pilot Station on the Yukon was planned. The representative from the Division of Game at that time from McGrath was alerted and invited to the Pilot Station meeting in November, 1976.

Nine days before the meeting, the Game biologist stated that he was coming, and announced that a special winter permit hunt of moose in Game Management Unit 19 (a) was cancelled because of too many urban hunters from Anchorage and Fairbanks seeking permits as opposed to the villagers who actually needed the moose for their families.

The Game biologist had agreed in a November, 1976 meeting that village hunters were now turning more to illegal snow machine hunts during the winter because of the increased pressure from urban airplane hunters during the legal season and that the winter hunt was a positive hunt by the Division of Game to legalize a subsistence hunt that was within the equilibrium yield of the region's moose herd.

For some unknown reason, four days before the scheduled meeting, the Game biologist called and said that he would not attend the Pilot Station meeting, and that he was planning to meet with two of the local Fish and Game Advisory Boards separately and at dates and times that would conflict with the Pilot Station meeting.

This agent then appealed to three representatives of one of the advisory committees in an attempt to discredit their delegation to the Pilot Station meeting. This agent also went on radio to publicly discredit the meeting and the representatives.

In spite of these problems, three of the Fish and Game Advisory Boards and 121 delegates met for three days in Pilot Station. The Game biologist sat in Aniak for three days, just one hour flying time from Pilot Station, and refused to attend. Through his urging, one of the Fish and Game Advisory Boards stayed away from the Pilot Station meeting.

At the meeting, past resolutions asking for the elimination of airplane hunting for moose were read. The delegates, after carefully reading the law, for no regulations had been implemented by the Board of Game in the past, proposed the creation of two subsistence hunting areas.

These proposals included the employment of local agents

for supervising airplane and boat hunting traffic, harvest tickets and enforcement, expanding the State's edible meat regulation to include all salvageable moose meat, new dates, and careful monitoring of hunting success through inspection and collection of harvest tickets to insure against overharvesting.

The proposal was passed by the three boards present for two of the three districts. Over 950 signatures were obtained from villagers in the affected game management units.

After making these proposals to the Board of Game, the local Fish and Game Advisory Boards tried to gather information on the increase in sports hunting pressure in the areas proposed. It was only after the boards contacted the State Ombudsman that information was released.

The information that was found was sketchy at best and pointed out that the Division of Game was unable to determine whether any increase was occurring.

The petition from the local Fish and Game Advisory Boards was received by the Board of Game within the deadline for the proposals. Pursuant to the law, it was necessary to hold hearings in the areas affected by the regulations proposed.

The Division of Game scheduled hearings in Aniak, which had not proposed a subsistence hunting area, Shageluk, which is the most difficult place for the four villages in that area to get to, and in Bethel, whose airplane hunters were vehemently opposed to airplane restrictions.

Through the efforts of a legislator from the Lower Yukon area, a hearing was obtained at St. Mary's. At first the Game biologist stated that he was told by the Director of the Division of Game where to have the hearings, but a call to the Director disclosed that the places for the hearings were entirely in the hands of the biologist.

A third call to the biologist obtained his statement that it was the Director's decision but that he would attend all the meetings. This biologist had studied the moose in the area since 1963.

As it turned out, the biologist only attended the Aniak meeting which was attended by airplane hunters and local guides and at which time the proposal was opposed. He did not attend any of the other meetings due to "bad flying weather" and previous commitments.

The person who attended those meetings for the Division of Game was a new, inexperienced biologist. At the Bethel hearing, 14 airplane hunters and guides voted to oppose the proposals while in the two village meetings, overwhelmingly the village audiences voted to support the proposals.

The Board of Game met in March, 1977. The Board rejected the subsistence hunting proposals but instead accepted a "controlled-use zone." Stating that the Board was afraid to implement the subsistence hunt-

ing law and feeling that it was unnecessary to meet the needs of the villagers, the Board moved to eliminate airplane hunting without providing for the other benefits pursuant to the subsistence hunting law.

None of the management tools proposed by the local Fish and Game Advisory Boards were adopted.

Following the acceptance of the controlled-use areas, the Board of Game had 30 days to receive comments on the changes it had accepted. During this period the Division of Game made an exclusive mailing to every boxholder in the City of Bethel and to all registered guides setting out the details and the locations of the approved controlled-use areas.

The Division of Game solicited opposition from the very class of people the overwhelming majority of the subsistence villages were trying to limit and control. Not one village person, including the local Fish and Game Advisory Boards, nor any of the 121 delegates to the Pilot Station meeting, received this mailing.

The local boards, however, learning of this mailing, were able to respond through telegrams to the Division of Game and signatures of 680 villagers supporting the controlled use areas.

On June 1, 1977, the Division of Game, stating that the overwhelming village support was in favor of the controlled-use areas, assured implementation of the zones and consented to their being promulgated.

Continued Next Week