

Aleuts protest fur seal restrictions

by Dave Elias

for the Tundra Times

Room C 117 of the Federal Building in Anchorage was the scene of a confrontation last week over the designation of the Pribilof Island fur seal population as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is proposing the designation, based on the idea that the fur seal population is below half the numbers observed in the 1940s and 1950s. If the fur seal population is designated as depleted, the agency may impose additional restrictions on the taking of the animals.

Representatives of the Pribilof Islands' Aleut villagers and other interested parties overwhelmingly opposed the agency proposal at the hearing Wednesday.

Larry Mercurieff of Saint Paul, Aleut Fur Seal commissioner, gave a detailed statement which labeled the finding of depletion premature. He said the finding was based on what he termed flawed scientific data.

Other Aleut speakers defended the rights of the Pribilovians to subsistence hunting.

Comments from representatives of Greenpeace, the Center for Environmental Education and the Humane Society favored the finding

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of depletion, but supported the rights of the Aleut people to subsistence activities.

Also, federal officials said there is no intent to further restrict subsistence activities. But the islanders appeared to be unconvinced.

Adrian Melovidov, chairman of the St. Paul Traditional Village Council, said the depletion finding is a "screen for depriving Aleuts from their traditional subsistence hunting rights."

Mike Zacharof, St. Paul mayor, said he did not believe pledges from environmental groups that they would not interfere with subsistence, and he added that he did not believe that fur seal stocks are depleted.

No one questions that the population of fur seals has declined over the past years. The key issue is whether the current population is "depleted," a technical term related to the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. Carrying

capacity is the number of animals that a given ecosystem can support in terms of food availability and other factors.

Mercurieff and others presented evidence questioning the agency's assumption that the carrying capacity has not changed significantly since the 1940s and 1950s.

They point to similar declines in bird and sea lion populations. The declines seem to correlate with changes in available food sources, primarily pollock, which has been intensely fished in the Bering Sea in recent years.

If the carrying capacity has been lowered, then the fur seal population is not technically depleted.

"The National Marine Fisheries Service continuously skirts the issues that fishery-related problems may be impacting the fur seal population," said Ron P. Philemonoff, chairman of the Tanadgusix Corp.

"It is our belief that further research will support that the carrying capacity has, in fact, declined significantly in the last two decades," he added. "This change is the result of major declines in food availability in the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea."

Philemonoff said the carrying capacity has further declined because of the reduced ocean habitats of the fur seal, which is caused by pollution and concentrated areas of net entanglements.