

Native subsistence unity is essential

by Paul Swetzof
for the Tundra Times

A short while ago many of us came together at the Subsistence Summit in Anchorage and developed a statewide Native position regarding the strategy we want Native organizations to take in order to preserve and enhance customary and traditional hunting and fishing.

About 700 people, mostly from the villages attended the summit. We unanimously agreed on three resolutions.

AFN, to their credit, sponsored the summit, but did not dominate it. In fact, village people, many representing their tribal governments, were the prime movers in the final decision-making process, though the nonprofits and some key figures from the for-profits got their 2 cents in.

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AFN had, I think, agreed to abide by the decisions made at the summit. The summit allowed AFN to back away from the position they took in support of the governor's proposed constitutional amendment regarding subsistence.

AFN received severe criticism from many segments of the Native community for supporting the governor's position or for that matter taking any position, without first obtaining the permission of those most affected — Native people, particularly Native villagers.

I am now starting to get the feeling that AFN or some of AFN's people are once again supporting the governor's proposed constitutional amendment which would put us back to the status quo before the Alaska Supreme Court threw out the rural priority.

I hope my feeling is unjustified. For AFN, or any Native organization, to move away from its commitment to follow the mandate of the subsistence summit would result in the unanimous decisions made at the summit to fall apart.

The consequences of this collapse would put us back at square one on the hunting and fishing issue and would erode the new spirit of trust and unity among individual Natives and our organizations which the summit reinforced.

This would be tragic and would cause the opening of old and new wounds which are just beginning to heal.

It is important to note that every Native organization, including the Alaska Native Coalition (based on a statewide village survey), all regional conferences, the Rural Alaska Community Action Program and the Rural Alaska Resource Association have come out in favor of either a Native preference or a Native and rural preference.

The three proposals decided upon at the summit can be summarized as follows:

- Support an amendment to the Alaska Constitution which permits the state to comply with federal law. This would allow the state to comply with current as well as possible future subsistence provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation

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- Lobby Congress for a Native subsistence preference (and a rural preference). This would effectively end the battle over which villages and which Natives get a subsistence priority and which don't, essentially allowing all of us to participate in the preservation of our cultures and leaving the fight over what is and what is not "rural" to non-Natives.

- Vigorously promote the contracting of fish and game management to Native organizations, particularly tribes under 638 contracting procedures and oppose any attempts to award contracts to the state of Alaska.

- If the state has not provided for Native people to exercise our inherent subsistence rights, our organizations

are to immediately withdraw support for any state constitutional amendment or any other state control over any and all lands in Alaska and immediately lobby Congress for the Native preference and a federal pre-emption over state lands.

This is, in essence, the mandate which we all agreed to follow. It's not what everyone wanted, but provides a strategy to eventually obtain our subsistence rights in the eyes of U.S. law.

I urge AFN and all Native organizations to stay the course and not go back on their word to our respective peoples. And the organizations should know that many of us will be watching them and reporting their actions even more than their words, up to this month and beyond.