

Hepatitis A outbreak strikes again

Water and sewer conditions has been blamed for the hepatitis A epidemic in rural Alaska villages. The latest result is the death of Robert Moto, 29, of Deering. Other deaths in villages affected in the last few months include Shungnak and Tanacross. There are hundreds of cases reported to health officials of hepatitis A, hundreds more still go unreported. Areas hit are Northwest and Interior Alaska and is continuing to spread.

Hepatitis A is a virus which is spread through food or water contaminated with human waste. Alaska, with its close-to Third World sanitation conditions, ranks among the highest in the nation. Administration of a vaccine has been authorized

by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in Interior Alaska several weeks ago. This drug is currently being used in Europe, however, it has not been approved for general use in the United States. Tests are showing that the drug, for the most part, is effective showing little or no side affects.

Hepatitis A symptoms include fever, nausea, fatigue, and abdominal pains, all similar to the flu. More serious cases show signs of yellowness in the eyes and skin, dehydration and liver failure. However, once affected, people become immune to hepatitis A, much like chicken pox.

More than 135 villages still use honey buckets and

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pit privies as the sole means of sewage collection and disposal. Water is hauled by villagers from watering points or from creeks or rivers. Raw sewage lies in open pits and bunkers throughout community sites. Flooding during breakup causes sewage to spread over a vast area.

Commissioner John Sandor, head of the Alaska Dept. of Environmental Conservation, will be presenting Senate Joint Resolution 25 on May 5 at a hearing specifically for the village water and sanitation conditions. Sandor says, "It is doubtful many Americans understand the dire sanitation conditions that the residents in rural Alaska are consigned to on a daily basis. These conditions are not only inferior to those found in the rest of America, they are, in many cases, on a par with Third World countries." This hearing is slated to start at 2 p.m. in the Senate Indian Affairs Committee hearing room, Room 485 in the Russell Senate Office Building.

"When more than 90 percent of Alaska's Native villages have inadequate waste water facilities and 60 percent don't have good water piped to homes, it is plain that we have a strong case for additional aid. It's not right that as we head for the 21st century, village residents continue to suffer the health problems that bad water causes," said U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski. Murkowski will take testimony on the critical water and sewer needs during the hearing scheduled this week.

Julie Kitka, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, added, "Safe water and sanitation in Alaska villages is one of the top priorities identified by the delegates at the AFN annual convention." Kitka is also scheduled to attend the hearing.

Anne Walker, president of the Alaska Native Health Board and Larry Merculieff, chairman of the Alaska Rural Sanitation Task Force, will be accompanying

Sandor to explain the task force's recommendations and the need for aid. Also testifying are Mary Nathaniel, Chalkyitsik; Myrtle Van Dorn or Aniak,

Niles Smith, mayor of Hooper Bay; Franklin Matchian of Chevak, and Paul Gregory, Bethel. Other witnesses are encouraged to testify at the hearing.

The Alaska Rural Sanitation Task Force has compiled more than 60 recommendations for improving rural sanitation conditions and has offered over 100

specific steps necessary to implement the sanitation strategy. It was recommended that federal agencies team up for 10 to 20 years to solve the problems.