

# AFN board votes for Arctic Refuge oil drilling

## *Stevens warns of rural crisis without new oil revenues*

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*Tundra Times staff*

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The Alaska Federation of Natives has decided to take sides in a major issue that deeply divides some of its constituents. In a 19-9 vote, the AFN Board of Directors passed a resolution in favor of opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil exploration. Some observers called the move a substantial departure from the neutrality that usually characterizes inter-regional conflicts among the group's members. Some worried about its potential impact on statewide Native unity on other issues.

The resolution was pushed hard by Arctic Slope Regional Corp., which has long favored a vigorous onshore oil development policy for the North Slope region. The session included a slide presentation and remarks by ASRC President Jacob Adams.

Oil development generally, and the resolution specifically, were hotly opposed by representatives of the Gwich'in Athabascan communities of the upper Yukon River drainage. They fear industrialization of even a relatively small portion of the refuge will jeopardize the Porcupine caribou herd, which forms the backbone of their subsistence culture.

The vote came after a 5-hour discussion June 13. Four board members abstained, and another four were absent. Although she declined to say how board members had voted, AFN President Julie Kitka said the vote was an act of leadership based on ample information and discussion which would also serve the Gwich'in in their efforts to protect the caribou.

"It is an effort to get the Native community involved in this discussion (of opening the refuge) as it goes forward, and that includes the

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Gwich'in," Kitka said. "AFN cannot function in an us-versus-them atmosphere."

The show of support was requested by Alaska's Congressional delegation and Gov. Tony Knowles to bolster their efforts to lift a long-standing ban on drilling in the refuge. Sen. Ted Stevens, speaking to the board via teleconference, predicted dire consequences for Native villages if new oil reserves weren't found to bolster the state's economy.

Also participating by teleconference were Knowles; Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer; Willie Hensley, commissioner of commerce and economic development and co-chair of AFN; and John Shively, commissioner of natural resources — all urging passage of the resolution,

and Ada Deer Assistant Interior for Indian Affairs, urging its defeat.

The Porcupine caribou herd annually migrates in a wide arc extending from wintering grounds in traditional Gwich'in country, into Canada and then northwest to the Arctic coastal plain near the Inupiat community of Kaktovik, where spring calving takes place. It is also near Kaktovik, far below the tundra surface, that many analysts believe the geologic structure holds promise of a large reservoir of oil.

Residents of both Kaktovik and the Gwich'in communities rely on the Porcupine caribou for annual subsistence harvests.

"We're not against oil development, but there's some special places that need to be protected, like the Porcupine caribou calving

grounds," said Gwich'in leader Sarah James of Arctic Village. "We'll stand firm with our position, no compromise. I feel sorry for the people who want to open up this special place. I've been all over the world and seen lots of destruction, forests that no longer exist, rivers that are polluted. Alaska is the last place that is still natural and the ecosystem works."

To a predictable degree, the vote split roughly along the sometimes fragile seam that continues to hold Native for-profit and non-profit interests together in a sometimes awkward, but undeniably powerful, political coalition with easy access to Congress. For example, Will Mayo, president of Tanana Chiefs Conference, representing scores of interior Athabascan villages, voted "no" on the resolution. Morris Thompson, CEO of Doyon Ltd., a company formed to administer part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in which most of those village residents are also shareholders, supported the resolution. However, it was Thompson who introduced an amendment to ASRC's resolution to protect subsistence resources as a condition

of allowing oil development.

Among those abstaining in the vote on the resolution was Eileen Norbert, representing Kawerak Inc., a Nome-based non-profit Native association.

"AFN has always refused to pass resolutions when they were more regional in nature," said Norbert. "This was a similar case."

Tom Tilden, representing Bristol Bay Native Association and constituent villages voted "no," saying he would be upset if AFN members tried to pass a resolution calling for oil drilling in the salmon-rich waters of his region, and could not in good conscience cast a vote that would essentially invalidate similar Gwich'in concerns.

Kitka said the resolution did not reflect a change in the way AFN does business, but was one of many complex, difficult issues the organization has to grapple with.

"I put a lot of faith and trust in the decisions of our board members," Kitka said.

Although there was no immediate indication that the ANWR vote would create a backlash that might complicate the AFN Convention when the full membership

meets to express its political will this fall, the move clearly upset some board members.

"I think there's going to be such a split," said one, who declined to be identified. "What is this going to do to AFN as an organization? AFN has no business voting on this."

One board member opposed to the resolution suggested the Congressional delegation and governor could simply have courted supporting resolutions from AFN's member organizations to demonstrate Native support. Others noted that considering abstentions, absences and nay votes, only 19 members, a bare majority of the 36-member board, voted to open the refuge.

Kitka stressed that Hensley and Al Kookesh, AFN's other co-chair and also a member of the Knowles Administration, retain board membership but do not vote and play no part in establishing AFN's meeting agendas. She credited Kookesh with an "outstanding" job as moderator of last week's meeting. She said he set and maintained firm guidelines, which included no personal attacks and orderly, unlimited debate.