

Natives speak on subsistence

By JEFFREY R. RICHARDSON

The right of Alaska Natives to hunt and fish for a living, which may be the most hotly-debated, emotional issue since the fight for statehood, came before the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention last Friday.

Following remarks by Alaska's Congressman Don Young, a panel was introduced to the convention which discussed subsistence problems around the state caused by over-hunting, poor resource management, wastage of wildlife resources, and lack of local village control in resource management.

The panel consisted of representatives from the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game and Native organizations.

Although the subsistence discussion remained under control, feelings ran high as Native people made it clear they would continue subsistence hunting whether or not federal and state regulations permitted them to.

Although State of Alaska, representative Bob Hinman, insisted that subsistence users of wildlife resources were given top priority under state policy so long as it was biologically possible to allow any taking of fish and game, pointed out that the Dept. of Fish and Game sometimes lacks the ability to carry out its duties because of lack of funds.

Although the panelists could not always agree on the best way to treat the subsistence issue, all cautioned that any effort to define what subsistence is should be a very careful process. Phil Smith, Director of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, an agency set up to facilitate input from rural Alaska into the governmental process, commented: that one response to Congressional attempts to define subsistence is that "subsistence is a word that's being imposed on a lifestyle from people who don't, who cannot appreciate the value of that lifestyle."

Gordon Watson, area director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska pointed out: that the word subsistence appeared in its most significant recent form in the land claims act. He said:

"I think that the word subsistence, where it appears is in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, what it meant, what Congress intended by the use of that word is what we're trying to figure out right now."

However, AFN representative Dave Case took strong exception to Watson's remark, stating that the legislative history of the land claims act is very clear on this point and that it is "unthinkable" that Congress and the Native negotiators intended to waive hunting and fishing rights for Native people.

The subsistence discussion intensified when opened up for audience participation. One man, a resident of southeastern Alaska, said taking away subsistence rights from Natives was like taking rice away from Oriental people or taking the cocktail hour away from bureaucrats.

The health director for the Cook Inlet Native Association, pointed out the mental health problems occurring among Alaska Natives as a result of the destruction of the subsistence way of life. She added that many Alaska Natives, particularly older people, were known to suffer from physical health problems as a result of dietary changes brought about by the changes in hunting and fishing patterns.

Several speakers were openly hostile to the government representatives. One suggested that someday, some hunter's floatplane "will never make it out of the bush."