

Muktuk, Maybe - Salmon Strips, No!

Confusion Over Native Foods

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BUTLER

The Tanana Valley Fairground in Fairbanks, last year's battleground over the serving of muktuk, is the scene this year for yet another fight on the serving of native-processed foods to the general public.

The State of Alaska's Division of Environmental Health (of the Health and Social Services Department) has refused a permit to allow the serving of smoked salmon strips processed on the riverbank. In the preparation, viscerated fish are washed first in river water, then in clear creek water and brine, and slow-smoked for four to five weeks.

The Department refused the permit on the grounds that adequate cold storage facilities did not exist at the site and that the available water supply did not meet the standards for public water.

Among other things which the state claimed were lacking was a cold storage "plant" with concrete floor. Paul Frith, regional head of the state's Division of Environmental Health, said that his office could not alter the existing regulations on the handling of fish products.

"I'm a regulation enforcer," said Frith, "not a regulation

setter. In the case of muktuk last year," he pointed out, "there were no existing regulations. This is not the case with fish. There are regulations



MERRILY EATING MUKTUK

and we have to abide by them."

The Tundra Times, which went to battle last year on the muktuk issue again took up the native foods issue on behalf of the Tanana people. Last year, the Division of Environmental Health agreed that while muktuk could not be sold at the fair, they would allow it to be given

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away for donations.

The State Fair is not the only problem area. All over the state, potlatches are held at which native foods are prepared and sold to the public. Under present laws, the sale of such native foods is illegal and so far as can be determined, no governmental steps have been taken to formulate new regulations.

In the interim between last year's fair and this year's, a Native Foods Advisory Board was set up to initiate a dialogue with the Division of Environmental Health, to help gather samples for testing, and to draw up a survey to be sent to schools with native students to determine if the students wanted native foods served in the schools.

Frith's office, with assistance from Morris Thompson of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, mailed out close to 2000 questionnaires. The return showed 89 per cent in favor of native foods.

"We can't scrap all the existing regulations," said Frith, "and we can't go out and do research and development. If it's desired that these regulations be changed, then you would have to go to the Commissioner of Health and Social Services and say, 'Here are regulations that we want changed.'"

The regulations are set by Fred McGinness. Commenting

from Juneau on the reoccurrence of the problem at this year's fair, Commissioner McGinness said that any changes in the regulations would have to be done at the department level.

He identified the correct department in his office for dealing with the problem as the Division of Environmental Health of the State Department of Health and Welfare, headed by Mr. Lloyd Morley.

"I will request him to look into it," said McGinness, "and to formulate some kind of policy where we do not have to deal with it on each individual instance but which could apply throughout the state."

In order for the regulations to be changed or for new regulations to be formulated to allow the inclusion of native foods into the commercial market, certain procedures

would be mandatory, including the holding of public hearings.

The Tundra Times argued that "Twenty-five per cent of the population of this state has confidence in their own rules and regulations for the processing of native foods."

It was also pointed out that the survey conducted by the Native Foods Advisory Board with the help of the Division of Environmental Health and the BIA, was clearly a mandate to the state to take action in this matter.

However, one year after the statewide controversy over the serving of muktuk at last year's Tanana Valley Fair, the state appears to be no further ahead on the issue of native foods for public consumption. Smoked salmon caught and prepared on the banks of the Tanana will not be sold at the fair.