Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON - In a letter sent to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Neal McCaleb expressed the Department of the Interior's deep regret over the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) decision not to renew the aboriginal subsistence whale quota for the 2003 - 2007 period. He also offered his agency's support to ensure that the subsistence needs of Alaska Natives are met, and that their whaling traditions continue.

"I don't understand, how the IWC could vote to deprive the Alaska Eskimos of eighty percent of their food supply causing them undue hardship and threatening their way of life," Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Neal McCaleb said. "However, I can assure you that my office will continue to advocate forcefully for the continuation of aboriginal subsistence hunts."

A vote on the joint bowhead whale quota requested by the United States and Russian Federation at the 54th Annual Meeting of the IWC in Shimonoseki, Japan failed, by one vote, to garner the three-fourth majority to renew it, totally ignoring the cultural, nutritional, and subsistence needs of the Alaska and Chukotkan Natives. The IWC voted against the 2003 - 2007 block quota despite the fact that it was identical to the 1998 - 2002 quota. There was no conservation reason, or challenge to the legitimate aboriginal subsistence traditions given. And, it disregarded an IWC Scientific Committee assessment that the annual take of up to 102 bowheads does not jeopardize the stock.

But, the conditions created by the vote may affect the subsistence of the Alaska and Chukotkan Natives that have hunted bowhead whales for thousands of years. Whaling underlies the entire way of life of the Inupiat and Siberian Yupik Eskimos of northern and western Alaska. Each whale harvested is an essential source of nutrition for the Natives, providing thousands of pounds of meat and maktak. Without this source of food, Natives in remote areas will have few alternatives to meet their nutrition and dietary requirements.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs has formed a workgroup made up of departmental staff to develop an action plan to assist the Alaska Natives with the ramifications of the IWC's action.

The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission is located in Barrow, Alaska, and was created in 1977 to preserve and enhance the bowhead resource, including its habitat, to protect Eskimo subsistence whaling and associated traditions, and to participate in the research and management of the stock.

Established in 1824, the BIA provides services to and carries out the federal government's trust responsibility for the 559 federally recognized Tribal governments and approximately 1.4 million American Indians and Alaska Natives nationwide. The BIA manages approximately 56 million acres of land held in trust for individual Indians and tribes in the lower 48 states and Alaska.