

## Location Makes Enforcement Tougher Article reprinted from the Anchorage Daily News Sunday

January 19, 1997

---

*Eileen Ewan, President of the Gulkana Village Council says in some ways enforcing the ban is beside the point. If it passes, a majority in the community is making a statement that alcohol is not acceptable. That can be as important to convincing people to stop drinking as fining them or throwing them in jail, Ewan and others say.*

The village lies tucked amid spruce trees between two frozen rivers, a cluster of prefab houses with a red church, community hall and pumphouse. It looks like other villages in rural Alaska and like many of them, Gulkana has suffered the tragedies of alcohol abuse and wrestled with the thorny issues of whether to ban booze. The village is now in the middle of an election to decide whether to ban alcohol with votes from a mail-in balloting scheduled to be counted Friday. But there's a big difference between Gulkana and other villages that have gone dry. Elsewhere the nearest liquor store may be an hour upriver by boat, or a \$50 flight away. In Gulkana you can get in your car and drive 10 minutes to the nearest bar.

If residents vote for prohibition, they will be the first community on Alaska's road system to go dry. Besides the obvious question of how the village will enforce the ban when booze is readily accessible by car, the election is raising questions about how to apply a law written with remote Bush villages in mind. Under state law, the alcohol ban would cover a stretch of the Richardson Highway. A motorist with a six-pack of beer in the trunk could be considered, at least technically, a bootlegger. The dry region would also include some residents of Gakona, a non-Native community that surrounds Gulkana. State officials say they'll sort out the details if the initiative passes.

But whatever the outcome, some believe the vote marks a larger movement among the region's villages to take control of their communities. Dealing with the alcohol problem is a critical first step. "We're hoping to let those people who drink see we are serious," said Lorraine Jackson, the village administrator for Gulkana. "We don't have anything against them, but we don't want any problems with alcohol, and we need to let the young people know alcohol is not the way."

Many of Gulkana's 75 residents rely on seasonal work like construction and firefighting, and subsistence – including fish from the Copper River and moose and caribou. Winter is a quiet time when the streets are mostly deserted and only the smoke rising from Chimney pipes give away people's presence. The push for the ban started in earnest last summer after two alcohol-related traffic accidents in which three residents of the nearby village of Copper Center were killed. In May 25-year old John Craig II and his 21-year-old cousin Leroy Dewayne Bell died when they lost control of their car on the Tok Cutoff and slid down an embankment. Bell's brother Davis was seriously injured. Two weeks later, Paul Pete, 47, went off the side of the Richardson Highway just south of Glennallen.

Alcohol abuse isn't limited to villages in the region, but it takes a high toll in the Native community. A study in 1992 by the Indian Health Service found the Copper River region led the state in cases of fetal alcohol syndrome, with a rate of 350 per 1,000 births, nearly four times that of reservations in the lower 48. High rates of sexual abuse, domestic violence and teenage pregnancy also exist in the region, said Ed Krause, human services director for Copper River Native Association, a non-profit group that provides health and social services to five area villages, including Gulkana.

Almost everyone in the village has lost a close relative, or friend. Death from people drinking too much are common enough that people refer to it as a person “pickling” themselves to death. “There’s just so many, and it’s caused a lot of heartache,” said Jackson, the village administrator. In the past 10 years, Jackson has had a brother die of alcohol poisoning, a lost a cousin in a car crash. Council members talked about a ban two years earlier but voted it down because of concerns about ostracizing residents who drink and disrupting the community. “But after the accidents, everyone wanted something done,” said village council president Eileen Ewan, a 32-year-old single mother of two who has actively pushed for the ban. Nearly 20 people showed up at the council meeting that followed the two deadly car wrecks,” she said. Over the next few months, the council met with the Alaska State Troopers, the state Department of Community and Regional Affairs, and officials from the local hospital. Several options were discussed, including requesting a village public officer who would have the time and authority to immediately deal with drunken residents or someone selling beer to minors. But Ewan was told it would be difficult to get the state to pay for an officer since the village is served by state troopers based in Glennallen, about 15 miles south. The council voted unanimously for a ban because they felt it was something they could do right away, Ewan said. “Even if it’s not successful, we’ve to try,” she said.

People pushing prohibition admit it will be tough to make it work. Enforcement is not a matter of frisking those who fly in or catching people bootlegging by snowmachine or boat from a package store miles away, as in Bush villages. In Gulkana, residents can bring in alcohol every time they drive into town, or simply leave town to drink and then return. The nearest liquor store – The Bush Bottle Bin – is a 10-minute drive down the Richardson Highway. The nearest bar, just past Gakona Junction, is even closer. There’s also the summer influx of tourists and visitors from Anchorage and elsewhere, including more and more people who stop at a bridge and campground just outside the village to fish the Gulkana River. “This absolutely is going to be more difficult to get a handle on than in a village that’s isolated,” said Col. Glenn Godfrey, who heads the Alaska State Troopers and has dealt extensively with alcohol-related problems in the Bush. “You have tourists coming through Winnebago’s and access to the contraband will be also easier. It will be a lot more difficult to enforce.”

The ban gives no special powers to the village council to search vehicles or homes and Ewan said she’s not even sure she could take away alcohol if she spotted someone with it. But in some ways enforcing the ban is beside the point, Ewan and others say. If it passes, the community will make a statement that alcohol is not acceptable. That can be as important to convincing people to stop drinking as fining them or throwing them in jail, they say. Unlike in other villages where prohibition battles have raged over personal choice versus community well-being, there’s been virtually no public opposition to the ban inside Gulkana. But down the highway, some non-Natives say they’re concerned. They say there’re sympathetic to the prohibition effort in the village but argue they shouldn’t be affected. As elsewhere the prohibition area would stretch in a five-mile circle from the middle of the village, extending to the neighboring, non-Native community of Gakona and a restaurant, bar, and some homes. Village leaders say they only want to make the village dry and are looking to the state to work out the details. Doug Griffin, president of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, said if the measure passes, he hope to rework the law so that the ban would apply only within the village.

Meanwhile, if Gulkana is successful in banning alcohol, some leaders in the region believe other dry votes will follow. Ken Johns, president of the Copper River Native Association, said he has watched the region’s villages take a stronger interest in controlling their communities over the past four years. The proposed ban is one part of that, he said. “I think we’ve come to the realization that we are the only ones that can help ourselves,” he said. “We can’t leave it up to the state of federal government to solve it for us.”