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1955 FUR-SEAL TAKE MAINTAINS ANNUAL AVERAGE

The annual sealing operations conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service on the Pribilof Islands in the heart of the Bering Sea ended July 31 and netted 65,638 fur-seal skins, Acting Secretary of the Interior Orme Lewis reported today.

"The fur-seal herd had grown from a low of about 132,000 in 1910, when the United States Government took over its management and protection, to a population of about 1,500,000 this year," Secretary Lewis said. "During this same period the Federal Government netted some \$17 million--more than twice the purchase price of the entire territory of Alaska--from the sale of sealskins. Undoubtedly, this is one of the world's greatest achievements in the field of wildlife conservation.

"Yet, although the Federal Government has held a virtual monopoly on raw fur-seal skins in this country for forty-five years it has never learned how to transform a single skin into the soft luxurious fur women have coveted since the days of Catherine the Great," Secretary Lewis said. "Today, as it has since 1913, the Government must depend upon a single firm in St. Louis for the processing of its entire supply of sealskins and we are fortunate that its rare skills and processes are available in this country. Before it was established the Government had to ship its sealskins to London for processing.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has been directed, Secretary Lewis added, to discover the mysteries of seal skin processing through a program of research financed out of proceeds from the semiannual seal skin sales. At the last sale in April, 24,746 sealskins sold for \$2,296,757.

Results of the research, one object of which will be to discover more economical methods of processing the skins, will be made available to the public.

At the same time, Secretary Lewis announced that the contract under which the Fouke Fur Company of St. Louis processes and sells all of the Government-owned sealskins was renegotiated last month. The company asked that the contract be opened for renegotiation in July 1953 because of increased production costs. Its terms were made retroactive to apply to the April seal skin auction in St. Louis.

Under the new contract, the company is paid a flat fee of \$15 plus 17.5 percent of the selling price of each seal skin it processes. The former contract provided a complex mathematical formula applicable to a number of varying conditions to fix the processor's fee. The readjustment sought by the company would have returned a fee of \$37.60 for each \$100 skin sold at auction. Under the new contract the company is paid \$32.50 for each \$100 skin sold.

In the course of the negotiations, Secretary Lewis said, it was established that the Government has no other outlet for processing its supply of sealskins except the Fouke Company.

"The Fouke Company is pre-eminent in its field and processes about 85 percent of the entire world's supply of fur-seal skins," Secretary Lewis said. "The Government has dealt only with the Fouke Company, and its predecessor, the Funsten Bros., of St. Louis, since 1913 when it began selling raw fur-seal skins in the United States. Throughout that long period Government-company relationships have been entirely harmonious. In fact in 1939 when an effort was made to institute competitive bidding the company, according to our records, was entirely cooperative. It is quite possible that out of this research program may come discoveries which will be of great assistance to the Fouke Company as well as other fur processors."

The Fouke Company, in addition to acting as sealskin processor and sales agent for the United States Government, serves in a similar capacity for the governments of Canada, the Union of South Africa and Uruguay, and for private shippers the world over.

Under terms of the Provisional Fur-seal Agreement of 1942, 20 percent of the annual Pribilof seal harvest is delivered to the Canadian government. The Provisional Agreement replaced the International Convention of 1911 between the United States, Great Britain, Japan and Russia which prohibited pelagic sealing--the killing of fur-seals at sea in the North Pacific.

Representatives of the governments of the United States, Japan, Canada and Russia will meet in Washington on November 28, 1955 to negotiate a new international agreement for the conservation of the Pribilof Islands herd.

The Pribilof Islands seal herd was threatened with extinction in 1911, largely because of the unrestricted slaughter of breeding females and their young at sea. After the United States Government assumed control of the herd the slaughter of females was prohibited and only three-year-old male bachelor seals were included in the annual round-up.

Polygamy is more highly developed in the fur-seal than in any other mammal. Although males and females are born in equal numbers, the mature bulls acquire harems of from 40 to 100 cows. Hundreds of thousands of excess bachelors are driven by the ferocity of the mature bulls to the outer fringes of the herd during the mating season. This makes it possible to harvest the skins of the surplus bachelor animals without decreasing the number of young that may be born.

The excess animals are killed by the native Aleuts who live on the islands of St. Paul and St. George, largest of the Pribilof group, some 300 miles off the mainland of Alaska. The islands were discovered in 1786 by Gerassim Pribilof, a Russian navigator, who was seeking the breeding ground of the fur-seal. They were under Russian management for 81 years, until the United States purchased Alaska in 1867.

Until 1913 all raw sealskins were shipped to London for processing and sale. Then the bulk of them were shipped back to this country. Only a small group of British workmen were skilled in the art of processing fur-seal skins. After the United States determined to process its own skins in this country, a small group of the skilled English workmen were persuaded to come to the United States and the industry in St. Louis was born. The process of preparing the skins requires more than 125 manipulations or treatment and each skin is handled individually.

The Alaska fur-seals have a coat of soft underfur which distinguishes them from the common hair seals seen in zoos and circuses and which are widely distributed over the world.

Regularly each spring the great Pribilof Islands herd comes out of the sea to settle down on the volcanic rocks. So far as is known, this is the only land the animals touch upon during the year. The young are born a few weeks after the herd arrives.

The collection of skins starts late in June and extends through July. This year the season opened on June 22 and closed July 31. The yield this year was 1,756 skins greater than last year's take of 63,882. The average annual yield over the past 10 years has been around 65,000 skins which indicates that the population of the herd has stabilized at about 1,500,000 animals.

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