

U.S.-Soviet fish pact is a giant step

by Sen. John Binkley

for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — There's no question that the warming of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States is benefitting our country and the world as a whole.

And it's nice to see that we in Alaska now stand to gain specific benefits, as well, from this new relationship with our former adversary.

In addition to the obvious travel and trade opportunities in the Soviet Union that Alaska businesses are in a prime position to take advantage of, there's a brand new agreement with the Soviets that represents nothing less than a giant step forward for fisheries conservation in the North Pacific.

The agreement, reached after four days of talks between U.S. and Soviet officials in Washington, D.C., recently, should result in the rebuilding of North Pacific salmon and steelhead stocks that have been seriously hurt by both legal and illegal fishing on the high seas.

Even better, it's very likely that this agreement will lead to other cooperative management efforts with the Soviets to rebuild and protect pollock stocks in the Central Bering Sea — the area between the U.S. and Soviet 200-mile zones referred to as "the Donut Hole."

The committee that negotiated this agreement, or convention, is the U.S.-USSR Intergovernmental Consultative Committee on Fisheries. I sit on the committee as an official adviser from Alaska, and although I was unable to attend this latest meeting, Sandra Borbridge of my staff represented me at some of the committee's final work sessions.

OPINION



The draft convention they approved will next be presented to the governments of Japan and Canada, and the committee members hope to hold their next meeting on it as early as May of this year.

After one or both of those two countries endorses it, the agreement would become an official treaty and would require further approval by the U.S. Senate. (Japan, which has been fishing on the high seas for many years under separate agreements with the countries the fish originate from — the United States, USSR and Canada — may well oppose the agreement.)

Here are the key points of the pact:

- It reflects the strong feeling of the two countries that such taking of

salmon and steelhead on the high seas is "irrational and wasteful."

- Accordingly, it would prohibit fishing for — and the incidental taking of — salmon and steelhead on the high seas, except as specifically agreed to by the ICC members.

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- It includes significant enforcement provisions for unauthorized harvests on the high seas.

- It creates a more comprehensive conservation program than those currently in place.

As a separate issue, the committee members devoted a fair amount of discussion to the unregulated harvest of pollock in the Donut Hole of the Bering Sea. The members expressed great concern over the ongoing impacts on stocks in this area and began preliminary discussion about what provisions might be included in a future agreement aimed at bringing these fisheries under control.

Members also discussed their concerns over high seas fishing in general

and the damage caused to sea birds and marine mammals by the continued use of drift nets running to tens of miles in length.

All in all, I'd have to agree with Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who called this new agreement with the Soviets "strong, strong stuff."

Having participated directly as an adviser in the previous three committee meetings on these issues and on drift net negotiations, I have understood the critical need to reach a better understanding with the Soviets on fishery conservation in the North Pacific.

This agreement is a sign we're well on the way to reaching that understanding, and it's gratifying to see that countries where salmon and steelhead originate are at last going to be able to play a larger role in assuring that their fish stocks are protected.

In closing I want to pay tribute to Harold Sparck of Bethel for the role he has played in bringing Americans and Soviets together on this agreement.

The state — and Western Alaska in particular — owe Sparck a great debt of gratitude for recognizing long ago that we needed to work closely with the Soviet Union if we were ever to improve our fishery conservation efforts in the North Pacific.

Sparck has worked tirelessly on this issue for the past seven years, and his efforts were not always appreciated by those in the international fisheries community. But his persistence helped us keep up the momentum, and he ought to take a great deal of pride in seeing his efforts finally pay off in a new agreement between countries that had been at odds on just about every issue for the previous 45 years.