

Alaskans must articulate vision for the future

by Byron I. Mallott

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JUNEAU — The debate surrounding the Economic Limit Factor and the inability of Exxon to deal with the Prince William Sound oil spill highlight not new issues, but the continuing inability of Alaskans, especially the Legislature and governor, to articulate a vision of Alaska's future that a majority of citizens can support.

As a result, it is possible for the oil industry to argue that a revised ELF is not in Alaska's interest to a somewhat receptive Alaskan audience, for who else has stated what the countervailing compelling interest may be?

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It is thought necessary by a governor already bloodied by past budget battles with the Legislature to decide that to gain his public policy priorities he must give up a second term.

And every special interest — every Alaskan — can be self righteous and indignant when asked to contemplate budget cuts or taxes.

As a result even when the oil industry's golden goose spectacularly fouls its Alaskan nest with 11 million gallons of Prudhoe crude, angry as Alaskans are, they recognize the ambivalence and confusion they feel about the future role of that industry in our state.

If there is to be a silver lining in the black cloud of the ELF and Exxon Valdez debates, let it be Alaskans seizing the moment to begin a realistic and purposeful dialogue about the Alaska we want to leave to our children.

Even today, Alaska has more real opportunity for the future than any other state and perhaps most other nations. The current budget mess notwithstanding, we have tremendous financial resources with which to secure a responsible future.

We have a small population and a large land mass, both precious and rare in a shrinking world. The population is highly motivated and experienced. The land mass is strategically located and richly beautiful.

I use the phrase *richly beautiful* carefully, for the natural beauty of Alaska is certain to be its ultimate tangible wealth.

I have my personal views but won't speculate here as to where the dialogue on Alaska's future should begin, but I submit that it is not happening now and has not been a meaningful public policy subject since the advent of oil.

The intervening years have demonstrated a powerful and latent ability to meet virtually every unmet and imagined need of our society without worrying about the inevitable requirement to pay the piper. Certainly much spending was necessary and timely, and we showed a compassion and caring in our priorities that were easy to respond to in times of plenty.

We showed the world and ourselves that we could save something for the future with the Permanent Fund. We are, however, facing very tough going as we deal with the need to reorder priorities and make tougher choices.

ELF and Exxon Valdez should serve as clear signals that all Alaskans must participate in determining Alaska's future, or those forces who know exactly what they want from Alaska and have powerful resources to pursue their interests will in our absence make our future for us.