

U.S. must not cave in to Japanese

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Most of the 11 million gallons of oil spilled from the *Exxon Valdez* March 24 continue to float in Prince William Sound, spreading gooey tentacles in small bays, choking the life from thousands of sea birds and marine mammals. . . and threatening the very existence of fishermen in Valdez and Cordova.

OPINION

As the lighter products of North Slope crude evaporate, heavier tar balls are left, slowly sinking downward to contaminate the food chain and possibly destroy the valuable salmon resources of Prince William Sound for at least several years, perhaps longer.

Now the fisheries of Kodiak, the nation's number one fishing port, and Kachemak Bay find themselves in the path of the roving oil slick.

Fishermen have real cause for concern for the future of their livelihood. What salmon do manage to escape the oil face an uncertain future as they run the gauntlet of drift nets on the high seas.

Fortunately, U.S. negotiators in the latest round of talks with the Japanese and Canadian governments in Washington, D.C., held firm and refused to give up more of our salmon in order to appease Japanese greed and politics.

With their fish stocks threatened by oil contamination, Alaska fishermen were in no mood to see their salmon given away to foreign fishing interests without getting a good deal in return.

The message to the U.S. State Department — from fishermen across the state, from Alaska's state legislators, as well as from Alaska's Congressional Delegation — was loud and strong: Do not strike a bargain with the Japanese at our expense.

After six intense days, the government talks ended in a stalemate with the Japanese refusing to compromise.

Since November, the Japanese have been asking for permission to convert their old mothership fleet in the Bering Sea to a more economically viable land-based fleet. Alaska fishermen rightly fear that such a move, without sufficient monitoring and enforcement, could institutionalize salmon fishing on the high seas well into the future.

In addition, the Japanese government announced that its ever-expanding squid fleet would move north this summer by 2 degrees. As these boats, fitted with gear capable

of capturing North American salmon, move into the colder northern waters, the chances of catching salmon are greatly increased. U.S. scientists are reluctant to give actual numbers, but ballpark figures have ranged as high as 1 million additional intercepted salmon!

That's why U.S. negotiators insisted that U.S. acceptance of the Japanese conversion proposal be linked to a statistically valid observer program in the new 2 degrees of squid fishing effort.

That's why the Governor's High Seas Advisory Group at its meeting in Anchorage last week urged the governor to immediately write Secretary of State Jim Baker informing him that the movement north of the squid boundary was tantamount to the Japanese announcing their withdrawal from the International North Pacific Fisheries Convention.

The INPFC is the international treaty which regulates salmon fishing on the high seas. In Alaska fishermen's eyes, fishing effort on an extended northern line would result in a calculated increased take of salmon — either incidentally or directly.

The High Seas Advisory Group also urged the governor to immediately ask the State Department and the Coast Guard what it intended to do with surveillance and enforcement efforts this season since it was obvious there

would be violations of the Magnuson Act. That act says the country of origin has authority over anadromous species wherever they roam on the high seas.

Since most salmon on the high seas are either North American or Soviet in origin, it's imperative that the United States continue its negotiations with the Soviet Union and reach an agreement to jointly enforce salmon gillnetting in the Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean.

The next round of those talks is slated for late May. As an advisor to those talks, I've urged the State Department to have such an agreement prepared and ready for signing at that time.

On another front, pressure is also building from Alaska fishermen to use reauthorization of the Magnuson Act, due to expire this year, as a tool for increasing the United States' ability to regulate and control high seas fishing. Our Congressional Delegation needs to be reminded that this is a high priority, and we're counting on their help.

High seas interceptions are often viewed as a West Coast fishing issue. But the hundreds of thousands of marine mammals and sea birds also taken in high seas gillnets makes this a national issue.

We can't let this issue get lost amidst the publicity surrounding the nation's worst oil spill.