

Fishermen feel sting of lower prices

Local boroughs lose millions of dollars in raw fish taxes

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

Despite state reports of record salmon harvests in several Alaskan fisheries, commercial fishermen — even those unaffected by last March's oil spill — say there is little to

celebrate this year.

But problems facing fishermen statewide are more a result of the depressed salmon markets than the devastating *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

"There are a lot of places that are feeling a sting this year," said Henry Mitchell, a member of the North

Pacific Fishery Management Council.

According to Mitchell, the bountiful harvests from areas such as Bristol Bay Cook Inlet and Southeast fisheries have not offset the drastic drop in prices which salmon are fetching in Japanese markets.

And as a result, local boroughs are

losing millions of dollars in raw fish tax revenues compared to last year, he said.

In Kotzebue, one of the areas hardest hit by deflated prices, chum salmon are selling for about 25 cents per pound compared to last year's

continued on page eleven

• Fishermen face 'ridiculously low' price

continued from page one

price of about \$1 per pound.

But harvests this year have been lucrative.

Chuck Meacham, a department biologist, said the statewide harvest could break the record.

"I'd give it better than 50-50 odds," Meacham said.

On the Kuskokwim River, the department reported that fishermen saw the second largest chum catch on record and the highest coho catch ever for this time of year.

In Prince William Sound, fishermen are now being allowed to fish in once-oiled waters. Managers scheduled

more frequent openings at the end of the season to make up for fishing time lost to the spill.

But Mitchell said that extending the seasons probably will not help the fishermen or boroughs much.

"They may catch a few more fish, but at that ridiculously low price, it won't make much difference," he said.

Mitchell blames the rock-bottom salmon prices on what he calls an "international conspiracy" by Japanese fish buyers.

"Japanese companies own 60 to 65 percent of the U.S. domestic salmon industry," he said, adding that he

believes these companies have secretly agreed to pay one set of prices.

"That's illegal," Mitchell said. "It's the sort of thing the U.S. government should investigate."

What the Japanese are doing, he said, is buying the fish for 75 cents less and selling to Japanese consumers for only 20 cents less than last year.

What does this mean for rural Alaskan economies?

"There is about \$400 million lost for local boroughs in raw fish tax revenues," he said.

Because of the adverse conditions some fishermen face this year and possibly next year, the state has

responded by trying to ease commercial fishing loan payments.

According to Bob Richardson, a fisheries loan manager for the state, people who want extensions on their loans can apply for them with the state.

"This year, because of the oil spill, there is an automatic extension of two months in case any of the fishermen were connected with the Exxon oil spill," Richardson said.

So annual payments, usually due in September or November, could wait until January, he said.

This is the first time the state has ever made automatic extensions on loan payments for Alaskan fishermen, he said.