

Federal salmon controls have been undermined

by Harold Sparck
for the Tundra Times

OPINION

BETHEL — Congress is now preparing to amend the Magnuson Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, the law that established America's 200-mile zone.

One article of that act, Section 102(2), says that the United States controls the destiny of its salmon both within and beyond the new 200-mile zone. Section 311, Magnuson's enforcement section, claims a U.S. right to seize any vessel taking U.S. salmon at sea.

The salmon controls in that act have been undermined by the recent Bush administration compromises with Taiwan, Japan and Korea on high seas squid fishing accomplished with gillnets 24 to 30 miles long. In those agreements, the United States allows the squid fleets to expand their fishing area into areas where U.S. salmon are known from scientific data to exist.

By signing the agreements, the United States is giving away its enforcement authority.

All pertinent parts of these one-year agreements to limit bycatch of U.S. salmon by these squid fleets are held over until the 1990 fishing season, subject to consent by these fishing nations.

The United States has failed to achieve its goal of obtaining statistically-reliable information on the bycatch of salmon, marine mammals and seabirds in this controversial high seas gillnet fishery.



The 10 U.S. senators from Pacific states who requested a strong Bush position on the squid fleets could not deliver on the driftnet agreements. The hope for Pacific salmon conservation and market relief under the authority of the Driftnet Act is over.

The U.S. fishing industry is divided, based on economics. Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska; Clem Tillion; and the Pacific Seafoods Processors Association's Barry Collier say the United States has struck a good bargain.

Bering Sea Fishermen's Association's Henry Mitchell, United Fishermen of Alaska's Dem Cowles, the state of Alaska's David Benton, Greenpeace's Alan Reichman and SEACOPS President Mark Tennant all say that the agreements struggle to reach even the minimum objectives of Stevens' 1987 Driftnet Act.

While the Congress works, the illegal harvest of U.S. origin salmon is continuing. The "sting operation" Murkowski is justly proud of put only two of Taiwan's 178 boats out of commission.

The remaining boats along with 432 Japanese squid boats are still out there fishing salmon. No one knows for sure how many Korean boats are fishing salmon. The illegal markets still operate. With these squid agreements, it is business as usual for the Japanese financiers of these squid operations.

The ocean is big, the U.S. Coast Guard small, and the president has no effective pressure to be strong on this issue.

Standing alone without the U.S. processing industry, U.S. salmon fishermen have joined with environmentalists and Pacific states to propose a worldwide ban on the use of high seas gillnets.

Alaska's delegation can help write this policy objective. That would give the president clear direction.