

FISH initiative still 'alive'

The FISH initiative may have gone down in flames, but the goal of getting more salmon to sport users remains smoldering in the hearts of a handful of sore losers.

FISH (Fairness in Salmon Harvesting) was spawned by sport fish groups from the Kenai Peninsula. It sought to get a guarantee of up to five percent of each year's Alaska statewide projected salmon harvest to sport users.

With salmon catches in recent years topping 200 million fish and strong runs expected well into the future, that would up the sport ante to 10 million salmon— a 1,000 percent increase.

The FISH proposal was set to go before Alaska voters in the November general election until the state Supreme Court unanimously ruled that it was unconstitutional to allocate fish by ballot initiative.

No sooner had the measure become moot, when Alaska legislators and legislative hopefuls (from Anchorage and nearby) announced they'd launch a legislative equivalent to the FISH initiative as soon as they got back to Juneau.

For example, one senator states that he believes the Fish Board is mandated to protect individual or discrete stocks that are spawned in each of Alaska's rivers and streams. He says he's worried about the resource—that excessive commercial fishing may result in the extinction of some stocks, and less genetic diversity among salmon.

Legislators planning to resurrect salmon allocation proposals should know how such measures will affect all the other Alaskans who don't reside on their home turf. For example, what would "discrete stock" management mean in southeast Alaska, Kodiak, Yakutat and along the Aleutian chain or on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers?

FISH activists would have us believe that sport users all over the state are disgruntled with their fishing opportunities. But let's get real. The repeated cry comes from one small, albeit politically powerful sport fish faction in one area of the state, Cook Inlet. And their claims of wide dissatisfaction are simply untrue.

Proof of that can be seen in the results of a first ever statewide poll of 1,000 Alaskan voters that was commissioned in August by Salmon for Alaska's Future, a group founded by former Governor Jay Hammond and others to defeat the FISH initiative, along with United Fishermen of Alaska.

Nearly 60 percent of the respondents said they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the current status of sport fishing in Alaska. By a 3-1 margin, respondents rated the "quality" of the sport fishing experience more important than the "quantity" of the catch. The poll also showed that frustration clearly exists with the overcrowded nature of Alaska's sport fishing areas. The voters also made it clear that they would not support a sport priority if the result meant a loss of Alaskan jobs or a loss of economic benefit to rural communities that depend on commercial fishing.

Are legislators who speak out in support of sport allocations ready to be held accountable for the potential loss of thousands of local fishing jobs and millions of dollars in fish revenues in coastal communities where economics are fueled by commercial catches? How do they propose to make up for the loss of fully half of all the fish landing taxes which go into the state's General Fund and are used for things like roads and schools in other regions far away from the ocean's edge?

As people for the sport fish persuasion prepare for the upcoming session, they should be responsible enough to look beyond their own back yards and remember this - commercial fishing is the number one private employer in the state of Alaska

comprising 47 percent of all jobs. The revenues generated each year by Alaska's seafood industry are second only to oil. Fish are Alaska's most important renewable resource.

That's become the mantra of industry-funded groups like Salmon for Alaska's Future, which recognize that the failed FISH initiative was a first volley and more anti-commercial fishing battles are brewing. SFAF's mission now is to educate a woefully uninformed public and policy makers, most of whom aren't even interested in the message.

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