

Eliason opposes Alaska fish farming

OPINION

by Sen. Dick Eliason
Senate District B

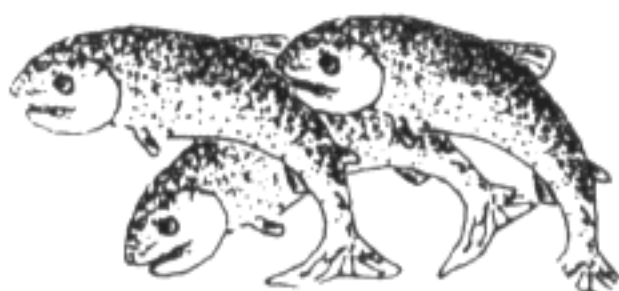
SITKA — Alaska's reluctance to open the door to fish farming has disgruntled the handful of people pushing for the establishment of the industry here, but it's clear that imposing the temporary moratorium on finfish farming in Alaska's coastal waters was a step in the right direction.

Permanently outlawing it is the wisest choice we can make for the future.

The salmon farming industry is in its infancy in neighboring British Columbia and Washington state, and developments there relating to disease, pollution and site location merit our attention.

Salmon farming operations must perpetually guard against disease, and the prospect of disease spreading from farmed fish to wild fish is frightening. A shock wave of alarm reverberated throughout the Northwest early this year when a fish disease known as VHS, never before seen in North America, mysteriously broke out at two salmon ranching operations in Washington.

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All the diseased fish at the facilities were destroyed and buried. Unless samples taken this fall from spawning salmon reveal that the fish are free of VHS, however, the case is not closed. If the disease is present, the entire Soes River may have to be poisoned.

The demise of a salmon-spawning river is a high price to pay, but the toll will be even greater if the disease spreads.

Two fish-farming companies in British Columbia, including the province's second largest, were recently fined for dumping diseased dead fish into open ditches near the ocean. The carcasses were eaten by bears and eagles, providing a route for the disease into the food chain.

In Washington state, a battle is raging between the burgeoning salmon farming industry and a coalition of private landowners and fishermen. Landowners are worried about the negative impact of the farms on waterfront property values, as well as en-

vironmental and visual pollution.

Fishermen are concerned about the threat of fish disease, damage to the marine environment attributable to massive quantities of organic wastes, use of antibiotics at fish farms and escaped farm fish breeding with native stocks.

Such issues would spark even greater controversy in Alaska due to public ownership of most proposed sites and adjacent uplands and the multitude of natural stocks at risk.

A significant challenge facing salmon farming operations just gaining a foothold in the market is the current global glut of farmed salmon. This predicted oversupply has created intense competition in the U.S. market, causing farmed salmon to be dumped on the market at a price below cost and in turn causing a major reduction this season in prices for fresh salmon from Alaska.

These market conditions really put the squeeze on newcomers to the salmon farming industry and those with high production/operating costs. If Alaska had promoted fish farming when the topic was first debated, Alaska product would have been hitting the market now, and the higher-cost Alaska operations would likely have gone under.

Global expansion of the industry, its rapid growth in Chile, which has no native salmon stocks and offers some of the lowest production costs in the world, and a supply which already outstrips demand indicate that from an economic perspective alone, it would be a foolish gamble for Alaska to jump

into the arena at this time or at any time in the foreseeable future.

Alaska must be dedicated to protecting and developing her existing fishing industry. It is the state's leading industry based on a renewable resource, worth hundreds of millions of dollars and has for many years provided the greatest number of non-government jobs.

The health of the industry is critical for local economies large and small. We cannot afford to jeopardize this valuable industry by putting natural stocks at risk; our economy could be completely upended.

The potential of fish farming to devastate Alaska's wild fish stocks is greater than that of a major oil spill. If rivers need to be poisoned to eradicate fish disease, as they have been in Norway, if the clear waters of Alaska become polluted by fish farm-

ing operations, if our natural salmon stocks are crossbred with fish lacking characteristics for survival in the wild, we will suffer catastrophic economic consequences.

In order to hold her own as well as possible in an international marketplace in which Atlantic salmon are gaining market share at an alarming rate, Alaska must focus on improving finfish quality, securing markets for the products which are her specialty, such as wild Pacific salmon from unpolluted waters and to protecting our valuable fishery resources from the threat of degradation posed by fish farming.

Sen. Dick Eliason, R-Sitka, represents Senate District B, stretching from Metlakatla to Yakutat. He is a member of the Senate Resources Committee and chairman of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee.