

Rural Alaska fisheries 'in limbo'

by E.W. Piper

for the Tundra Times

The abrupt adjournment of the state Board of Fisheries has set the rumor mill grinding, and left the plans of many rural Alaska fishermen in limbo.

When the board unexpectedly folded up and went home from its winter meeting in Anchorage this month, it left behind a clutch of unanswered questions and a mountain of unfinished business — including 500 proposals affecting fishermen from Southeast to the northwest Arctic.

In the days before the adjournment, rumors about board members making back-room deals and trading votes on different proposals swirled around the meeting.

While rumors at board meetings are always as common and as numerous as hatchery pinks, the board itself elevated the scuttlebutt to the status of a major issue. Board member John Garner of Southeast said the rumors had undermined the credibility of the board, and he moved to adjourn. With

no debate allowed on such a motion, the vote came swiftly; only Bix Bonney of Anchorage voted against it.

Since the meeting broke up, at least four board members have submitted their resignations to Gov. Steve Cowper.

Cowper has not yet acted on the resignations of Garner, Jesse Foster of Quinhagak, Jeri Museth of Southeast and Ron Jolin of Kodiak. Legal requirements for setting up a new meeting have not been worked out, and there is a possibility no meeting will take place before the start of the 1987 fishing seasons.

While the labyrinth of "fish politics" will surely occupy attorneys, administration officials and others throughout the winter, many rural fishermen are left to wonder what kind of regulations, allocations and harvest they face this summer.

Fishermen in the Naknek-Kvichak area have a dispute over sockeye harvest still brewing from last year. Questions about harvest of western Alaska chums during the False Pass

sockeye fishery have not been resolved. Eligibility for several western Alaska herring fisheries may be radically changed because of the board's inaction.

According to Steve Pennoyer, deputy commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, these are just a few of the pressing questions left unresolved.

Larri Spengler, the state assistant attorney general who works with the board, said that in cases where the board failed to act, regulations and allocations from last season will govern the coming season's harvests — unless the board comes back into session soon.

There are several key exceptions to that rule, however. Last year's allocation of western Alaska chums taken at False Pass expired last season. Jesse Foster of Quinhagak fears the chum catch in that area will be now be "unlimited," which may hurt the commercial fishermen who catch fall

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chums in the Yukon River.

And, Foster added in a telephone interview, the herring fisheries in several areas now open only to local fishermen could become fair game for larger vessels from outside the area. Pennoyer cited Nelson Island, Security Cove and Goodnews Bay as three of the "super-exclusive" herring fisheries that could be affected.

Said Foster, "In other words, the fishermen of the Yukon-Kuskokwim are the big losers in this controversy."