

Guest interview:

Sen. Zharoff fears oil spill impact on subsistence



Senator Fred Zharoff

Senator Fred Zharoff represents a large area of Western Alaska, from Kodiak, his home, to the end of the Aleutian chain and up to the Pribilof Islands. A commercial fisherman by trade, he has a deep concern about both the short and long term results of the EXXON Valdez accident.

CEDC: How serious was the oil spill in the Kodiak area?

ZHAROFF: The fishing economy was devastated in terms of being able to catch and process salmon.

CEDC: Throughout the Island?

ZHAROFF: The major impact area was Shelikoff Straits and the western end of the island. However, there were some areas where our people were allowed to fish.

CEDC: How were the areas determined safe?

ZHAROFF: The main concern is the quality of the salmon when they hit the world market. Wherever there was any trace of oil, that area was closed. We don't need to compound the problem of the oil spill by sending spoiled product to market.

CEDC: In addition to EXXON's efforts, there were a lot of volunteer attempts to help. Companies like Koncor did their best to fabricate booms to stop the oil from entering hatcheries and important bays. Did this do any good?

ZHAROFF: Yes, when the oil was within inches of the surface. But once the oil turned to the heavier mousse which moves at lower levels in the water column, it was more difficult to contain.

CEDC: What are your long term concerns?

ZHAROFF: The effect on all of the fisheries. When the oil arrived, there were larvae out there — ground fish and salmon. We don't have any idea of what the impact will be. Salmon operate on

a one to four year cycle. It may be four or five years before we know the impact.

CEDC: What about subsistence?

ZHAROFF: This is an important issue, and it hasn't received enough attention. I'm working with the Department of Environmental Conservation right now. We should be taking salmon now for our winter needs. We should be putting it up. If we don't, what will our villages do this winter?

CEDC: What about subsistence animals?

ZHAROFF: No one has a good handle on that. The deer spend a lot of time on the beaches eating kelp, which could be tainted. Neither DEC, EXXON or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have looked at the impact on subsistence. They've spent all their time looking at sea otters, bears and eagles, none of which are subsistence animals.

CEDC: What are the frustrations, if any?

ZHAROFF: Explaining the unexplainable. Many of our villagers — from Larsen Bay, Karluk and Akhiok — took their own initiative. They didn't wait for contracts with EXXON; they began cleaning up the beaches in their areas. Before we knew it, someone was jumping down their throats. This land has always belonged to the Koniag people. Our livelihood and everything else depend on wildlife.

We can't just stand around and wait to do something.

CEDC: Has this been sorted out yet?

ZHAROFF: Not really. There are no provisions for disposing of the bags of oily materials. So the bags are rotting in the sun while animals come down to the beach, smell the carcasses of other animals in the bags and break them open.

CEDC: Has there been adverse impact on the mariculture industry?

ZHAROFF: Not that I'm aware of. We must monitor it closely. The task ahead is to get it back to a pristine environment.

CEDC: Where do you see the most need for state or federal assistance?

ZHAROFF: With the emotional stress and trauma after its over. We didn't ask for the oil spill. People's lifestyles have completely changed in the last four months. A lot of people have been working 12 to 14 hours a day on clean-up. We haven't done our wood gathering and berry picking for the winter. There could be a lot of stress out there in the months ahead.

CEDC: What will this mean?

ZHAROFF: There has been a positive turn-around lately in terms of alcohol and drug use. The people have addressed it at the local level. This fall will be a major test. We don't want to regress.