

Rural Alaska must act soon to protect Bering Sea fish

by Harold Sparck
for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Unless Bush Alaska moves very quickly, the Seattle fishing interests that dominate the Bering Sea will eliminate future Bush benefits from use of this ocean.

Already the Seattle-based Bering Sea trawl fleet intercepts salmon, herring, crab and halibut bound for existing and future in-shore Western Alaskan fisheries.

No federal limits exist on the number taken as by-catch in the ocean fisheries. This negative allocation of fish to Seattle takes money out of the commercial and subsistence economy of every villager living on the Bering Sea Rim.

Now, the Bush administration is being lobbied by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council to impose federal limited entry on off-shore Bering Sea ocean fisheries.

If the council plan of a Jan. 16 cut-off date for all boats to be able to participate in future Bering Sea fisheries is accepted by the Bush Administration, villages on the Bering Sea Rim will be shut out from joining in this fishing bonanza.

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The Bering Sea is filling up and will soon be overcrowded with American fishing activity. None of this ocean fishing activity benefits the small villages of the delta. The large start-up costs to purchase, outfit and fish an ocean-going vessel have prevented villages with their limited economy from entering the boom.

More and more U.S. boats are entering this fishing bonanza worth more than \$1 billion a year to fishermen at today's value of the U.S. dollar. More than 50 combination fishing and processor boats, as well as 1,600 plus trawlers plan to fish the Bering Sea in 1989. Other than a few small trawlers in Cook Inlet and Kodiak, these boats berth in Seattle and fish Lower 48 crews.

The process of sorting out who benefits and who loses in the Bering Sea by imposing limited entry is a political question.

The council will next receive public comment and vote on this issue at its Anchorage meeting during the week of April 10.

Western Alaska's only vote on the council, Henry Mitchell of the Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, stood alone opposing the council's action. Western Alaskan fishermen must join with Mitchell in seeking a future in the Bering Sea ocean fisheries.

Call or write your Bush legislators, Gov. Steve Cowper and the Alaskan Congressional Delegation to prevent any form of ocean limited entry that denies Bering Sea Rim villages in Bush Alaska from sharing in the Bering Sea ocean fisheries.

OPINION

