

WASHINGTON COMMENTS

Sen. Frank Murkowski



DRIFTNETS THREATEN ENVIRONMENT AND ALASKA FISHING INDUSTRY

A crime against nature is being committed in the waters of the North Pacific. The victims are our salmon stocks, marine mammals and sea birds. Also victimized are our Alaska fishermen who lose over \$10 million each year in salmon catches.

The source of the problem is pelagic driftnets - monofilament gillnets that are panels of plastic webbing suspended 26 feet vertically in the water. Each night more than 20,000 miles of net is set adrift enveloping the North Pacific Ocean. Each year an estimated 6,000 Dall's porpoises, 750,000 sea birds, 300,000 chinook salmon, 4,000 Northern fur seals and an unknown quantity of squid are trapped and killed by these nets.

The offenders are the pelagic driftnet fisheries of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and other Asian nations. The fisheries are composed of distinct fleets designed to catch specific species of fish. As well as pelagic driftnetting, the fisheries also "ghost fish" - that is - they catch our marine life with pieces of net that are broken off or lost, or abandoned by boats that needed a quick escape because they were caught fishing illegally.

At dusk throughout the fishing season, these fleets set their nets. The nets drift with winds and currents near the surface of the water and are pulled in at dawn. The fishing season lasts from 40 to 70 days each year.

As passive fishing devices, the driftnets entangle the gill plates and other body parts of fish and other sea creatures. By adjusting the buoyancy of the net with floats at the top of the panel and weights at the bottom, the nets can be suspended like a curtain at any depth in the water column and can either be anchored in one location or drift with the wind and currents.

We learned through recent testimony given in U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearings that the United States is determining the size, distribution and the effects of the foreign high seas fisheries. Unfortunately, because the fisheries take place beyond our Fishery Conservation Zone, our management authority is minimal.

It's a crime that these foreign fisheries are depleting our fish stocks, marine mammals and seabird populations. They're also hurting our Alaska commercial fishermen who depend on these resources for a cash economy. And they're hurting the Natives of the Pribilof Islands who depend on the North Pacific fur seal for food.

To resolve this issue, independent research is being carried out by the United States, Japan and Canada under the auspices of the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission (INPFC), although it is limited to analyzing the catches of the Japanese mothership and landbased fleets. Of all the vessels of the foreign fisheries, only the Japanese salmon mothership fleet of 172 boats is subject to a U.S. -Canadian observer program.

The United States has also entered into a long series of bilateral negotiations with Japan. Most recently, we met with Japanese officials in January, but again we were not satisfied with their position despite the U.S. delegation efforts to be flexible and accommodating.

We have joined with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and Governor Sheffield in asking the State Department to withhold all further directed bottomfish allocations to Japan in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone until a satisfactory agreement has been reached on the salmon issue.

Our perseverance is beginning to pay off. The United States is starting to catch the attention of Japan's fishing industry. Unfortunately, they are retaliating with inflammatory statements and threats of trade restrictions.

In the last month, we were notified by U.S. fishing interests engaged in joint ventures with Japanese companies that the Japanese government might not allow any joint venture harvested fish to be imported into Japan until their bottomfish allocation is released. This would effectively terminate all joint venture activity between U.S. and Japanese companies.

One point to keep in mind is that because Japan is making these accusations, they may be taking more Alaska salmon than they are admitting.

I intend to keep pressure on Japanese officials to do some serious negotiating. At a bare minimum we need greater observer coverage of Japan's salmon fleet. I have also asked Secretary of State Shultz to exercise his obligations to the U.S. fishing industry and release no further bottomfish allocations to Japan until an acceptable agreement is negotiated.

We will continue to monitor the activities of other countries fishing in the North Pacific as well. The United States has reached an agreement with Taiwan to regulate their squid fishery and last summer participated with several Pacific nations in cooperative research on the incidental catch of mammals and sea birds.

Sincere and dedicated efforts by Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and other nations must be extended to eradicate this menace and help save the sea life of the North Pacific.