

"I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it" -VOLTAIRE

SHEFFIELD STICKING TO HIS GUNS ON BRISTOL BAY OIL SALE

To listen to some people tell it, namely the *Anchorage Times*, the Alaska Support Alliance, the U.S. Department of Interior and others, petroleum exploration in the Bristol Bay "poses no significant threat to the fisheries."

Such persons remind us that the environmental consequences of oil exploration in the North Aleutian Basin have been studied for "Eight long years," and they urge that the sale proceed posthaste. With such impatience as their standard, one wonders whether they believe the oil is going to disappear!

Their arguments have a familiar ring to them. Many will recall the years of study ensuring the "safety of nuclear power," or the extreme unlikelihood of oil spills in the Puget Sound area.

Through it all, Governor Sheffield has shown he understands the choice facing the State of Alaska and has weighed the benefits of the various interests involved quite well. This takes courage in a state whose revenues are dominated by the very industry pushing for the sale.

On the one hand, Alaska has a renewable resource that contributes over a billion dollars a year to the state's economy. Besides the dollar value, we have numerous people who depend on salmon and other stocks in Bristol Bay for their very existence.

On the other hand, we have an unknown quantity of oil whose value, in all probability, will only increase over the long term. And Alaskans derive far less direct benefit from a federal lease sale than from a red salmon on the table.

Interior Secretary Hodel has said that "the threat of a spill is remote. And even if a spill occurred, the damage generally would be negligible and of limited duration." There are a lot of qualifiers being palmed off on us in those statements!

How "remote" is remote, Mr. Hodel? Can you tell us for certain? Will you guarantee the resource will not be harmed? What does it mean that the damage "generally" would be negligible? What about the cases when it would *not* be negligible? How about of "limited" duration? A day? A year? A decade?

It's bad enough that the people who would be most affected by the potentially adverse consequences of such exploration are also those who derive the least direct benefit; that those who are entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the cultures of those people minimize the harm which may come to them as a result is too much to bear.

Perhaps it's time to turn the problem around and look at it from a different perspective. Let us have the benefit of all those qualifiers for a while. What "significant" benefit will be derived from those taking the highest risk? How "limited" in duration will those benefits be to the people most dependent upon the resource?

Governor Sheffield has asked himself those questions, and he's sticking to his guns.