

Protection for all

Last week's announcement by the federal Department of Interior that it planned to accelerate oil lease sales in waters off Alaska brought protests, some mild and some not so mild from state officials and representatives.

Particularly outspoken about the new lease schedule was Gov. Jay Hammond who pointed out "enormous adverse impacts" of oil and gas exploration in Bristol Bay where fishermen enjoy one of the richest salmon and herring fisheries in the world.

But, during the same set of comments on the oil lease sale changes, Hammond also said the state has supported aggressive oil and gas leasing off Alaska's shoreline. He has been quoted as saying "of the originally proposed 11 sales which rim nearly the entirety of our coastline only two controversial offerings in fish-rich Bristol Bay currently are being opposed by the state," and he noted two sales in particular as backed by the state—Lower Cook Inlet and the nearshore area of the Beaufort Sea.

True, it seems the state has backed such sales, although the people in the areas, particularly the Beaufort Sea have objected.

Why does the state object so strongly to exploration and development in fish-rich Bristol Bay, the waters of which wash up on the shores near the governor's home in Naknek, while it advocates aggressive development in the Beaufort where residents survive on the vagaries of weather, ice, whale and seal populations susceptible to the whims of nature and the possibilities of disastrous accidents endangering the sensitive arctic food-animal populations?

The possible answer can be told as much in terms of economics as it can in terms of protecting the home folks. More people obviously earn their livings on the Bristol Bay salmon fishery and the northern Aleutian Shelf king crab fishery than do the residents of the North Slope. More commercial fishing means more money in state coffers at one step of the economic system or another.

Still, Hammond living in the area for so long must by nature be more knowledgeable about and akin to the problems of the bay than perhaps he is about other parts of the state.

It's only natural to be more sensitive to our immediate surroundings, only natural to want to preserve what's dear to us, but what's needed here is a broader sensitivity, one that expresses the needs of all the people in the state.

If the state is going to protest and battle for a delay in Bristol Bay then also it should pick up the arguments of the North Slope. In one way or another, each of us has something to lose, and something to gain, from future oil development. But, the nation's insatiable rush for new sources does not give anyone, government, corporation, population majority or individual, the right to run over another's culture or his basic source of sustenance.

If the state is going to protect the rights and interests of some, it should fight to protect the rights and interests of all whether it be a village of 20 or a commercial salmon fleet of thousands.