

Villagers voice fishing concerns to Gov. Cowper

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TOKSOOK BAY — Fishermen in this Southwestern Alaska village presented their concerns about fisheries issues Thursday to Gov. Steve Cowper, who traveled to the village to listen to local residents.

Cowper and his wife Michael toured Bethel and Toksook Bay in a whirlwind trip to Southwestern Alaska, aimed at gathering comments from rural Alaskans.

"I promised in 1986 to try to make sure you get fish, not outsiders," Cowper told Toksook Bay residents in a meeting in the village Thursday afternoon. "Outside fishermen have no business being in this fishery."

Cowper was referring to concerns about the Nelson Island herring fishery raised by local fishermen. Toksook Bay residents are meeting with officials of the state Limited Entry Commission to discuss the possibility of initiating a limited entry permit system for the herring fishery.

Creating a limited entry permit system would allow only past participants of the fishery to obtain per-

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mits, which would include current large fishing interests from outside the area. But it would prevent new ones from coming in, according to Phil Smith, limited entry commissioner.

Smith was also at the Toksook Bay gathering, and planned to meet with villagers following Cowper's visit to discuss their concerns in more detail.

Smith told villagers a point system tilted toward local residents can be employed by the state if a limited entry fishery is started.

Toksook Bay fisherman Joe Therchik told the governor that village

elders' hearts have been broken since large Outside fishing interests have begun exploiting the fishery. "This country is my country," Therchik said.

Local fishermen also complained about the fact that this year the herring fishery has only two three-hour fishing periods. Large boats can haul in up to 20 tons during each period, they said, while the local fishermen are lucky to get three and a half tons in that time.

Cowper offered no immediate solutions to the villagers, but he said he would do everything he could to help

them.

"I came to listen," he said.

The governor also met with fishermen in Bethel, as well as the Bethel Chamber of Commerce. The most common complaint in Bethel was about bureaucratic red tape and the need for state government to start helping small business owners.

Addressing the Chamber of Commerce, Cowper said he believes the worst of the state's budget woes have passed and that his administration will be focusing on stability.

"The problem is that no one was planning while the oil money was

pouring in," he said. "It was a construction-based economy."

He said he will be working on programs aimed at creating jobs for Alaskans, particularly in rural Alaska.

"There are people out of work all over this state," he said.

On the plane back to Anchorage, Cowper discussed a trip he hopes to take to Siberia, in coordination with Dr. Ted Mala, who is working on Siberia-Alaska exchanges of information on Northern health issues.

Cowper said the trip is only in the planning stage at this point, and he will release further details later.