

Spill reinforces fears for Bristol Bay

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Last week the Alaska Senate held its first full hearing on Senate Joint Resolution 11, calling for a cancellation or delay in oil and gas leasing in Bristol Bay and the North Aleutian Basin.

The resolution's sponsor, Sen. Fred Zharoff, D-Kodiak, says oil exploration and drilling shouldn't occur in this area until oil spill cleanup technology has developed to the point that it can cope with the environmental conditions found in Bristol Bay.

How ironic that at the same time legislators debate this issue, state and federal officials are still struggling with the seemingly impossible task of containing and cleaning up the 11-million-gallon oil spill in Prince William Sound.

The spill in Prince William Sound was an event oil company officials promised us would never happen. And even in the unlikely event it did happen, Alaskans were assured that the oil industry's cleanup plans could handle any problems in any marine environment without significant environmental damage.

Those assurances look like empty promises now to the fishermen of Valdez and Cordova and other Prince William Sound communities who were just gearing up for the upcoming herring season. That fishery could well be history.

It's fortunate that the summer salmon runs are still months away. However, newly hatched salmon smolts are just getting ready to leave their safe havens in Prince William Sound rivers and hatcheries, and their future is uncertain.

No one knows yet how extensive the environmental damage from this oil

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spill will be.

But we do know several things:

- Exxon and Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. were inexcusably slow in responding to initial reports of the spill.

- Actual cleanup of a spill of this magnitude in the relatively benign waters of Prince William Sound appears hopeless.

- Public trust and confidence must be restored before future oil development proceeds.

Which brings me back to my original topic — Bristol Bay.

I have always been a strong supporter of oil development in Alaska. There is no question that the state has benefitted from this development. But I've also always believed that there are certain risks involved with the drilling of oil, and those risks must be weighed against the benefits before any development proceeds.

That's why I've always opposed exploration and drilling in the rich waters of Bristol Bay, at least at this time.

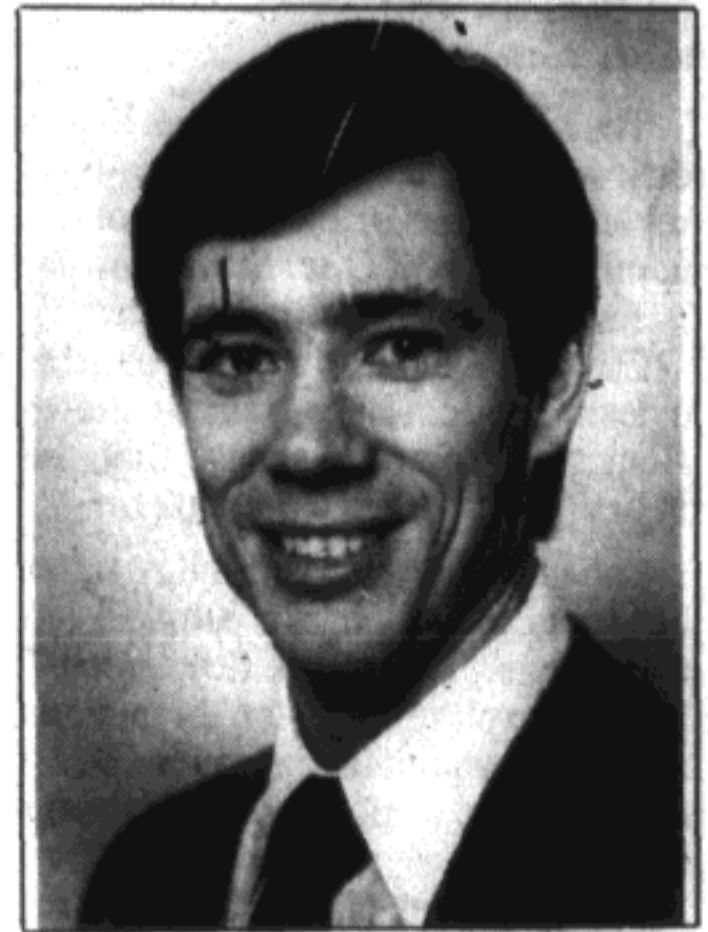
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This area of the North Aleutian Basin is one of the world's most important wildlife migration routes. It's used by the world's entire northern fur seal population, by the entire Pacific gray whale population, by hundreds of thousands of geese, millions of ducks, not to speak of the millions of salmon.

Those waters support the world's largest sockeye salmon fishery, a world-class herring fishery and major parts of the king crab, tanner crab and groundfish resources of the Bering Sea.

Ten thousand people are employed in these fisheries that combined are worth more than \$1 billion. At last year's prices, a single sockeye salmon was equal in value to a barrel of oil.

Place all those resources on one side of the scale, weigh them against the federal government's own estimates of potential hydrocarbon resources as



among the lowest of all the proposed offshore oil leasing areas in the nation, add in the recent events in Prince William Sound, and the answer is obvious: now is not the time for exploration or drilling Bristol Bay.

In fact, President Bush should heed Gov. Steve Cowper's request to include Bristol Bay with three upcoming oil lease sales off Florida and California in a federal review of the environmental effects of offshore oil development.

I hope that the Alaska Legislature will join Sen. Zharoff and other legislators like myself in urging the federal government to immediately cancel the oil leases in the North Aleutian Basin. The oil's not going anywhere — it will always be there for our future generations.

Oil development has been good to Alaska. But in Bristol Bay, the risks are high — and the potential benefits just aren't worth it.