

Japanese fishing poses threat to Alaska

by **Sen. John Binkley**
for the *Tundra Times*

Many people are aware that foreign fishing vessels are taking a large number of our salmon on the high seas.

What may come as a surprise to some, however, is that the Japanese are fishing for salmon within our 200-mile zone, called the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. These Japanese fleets also intercept a large number of Western and Interior Alaska salmon.

Until this year, U.S. observers have been allowed on Japanese catcher vessels operating in international waters off the coast of Alaska, including the central Bering Sea, to monitor compliance with international salmon harvest agreements.

Currently, there are harvest quotas on the number of king salmon the Japanese may harvest incidentally to their directed pink and chum salmon fishery.

Without U.S. observers directly on the catcher vessels, there is no independent method of verifying the king salmon take and little incentive for the Japanese high seas fleets to

respect the negotiated king salmon quotas.

Because of the depletion of certain king stocks, particularly on the Kuskokwim and upper Yukon, special conservation measures are needed again to protect those stocks.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game is proposing to eliminate the directed king fishery on the Kuskokwim River for the second straight year. In addition, it appears that restrictions in the chum and sockeye directed fisheries, as well as the subsistence king fishery, may be necessary to protect the depleted king stocks.

This situation is completely unacceptable to me, as well as the thousands of Western Alaska fishermen who depend on salmon for income and food on the tables. Our local fishermen are being shut down so that Japanese fishermen can catch our salmon in our waters.

The Yukon and Kuskokwim region is one of the most economically disadvantaged in the United States. Commercial fisheries represent the single most important source of cash income, yet produce an average of less than \$7,000 for each fisherman annually.

ADF&G estimates that the total losses from the proposed conservation restrictions on the Kuskokwim fishery may total \$1 million this year from a fishery in which the total amount paid to the fishermen averages \$3 million a year.

ADF&G estimates that the Japanese fleets take about 100,000 Western and Interior Alaska king salmon annually, with an additional 60,000 kings that drop out of the nets and die.

These figures do not include other foreign fishing fleets operating off the Aleutian Islands that also take a large but unknown number of Western and Interior Alaska salmon.

Because the Japanese are fishing for salmon within the 200-mile zone and in international waters, the State of Alaska has no direct influence over the Japanese fleet activity.

However, we can exert influence over those who represent us in Washington, D.C., and that is what we hope to accomplish through Senate Joint Resolution 34, which I introduced recently.

SJR34 requests that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration administrator not issue the Japanese a marine mammal permit,



which they need in order to fish in U.S. waters, until they agree to allow U.S. observers on their catcher vessels. In addition, it requests that the NOAA administrator reduce the number of marine mammals that may be taken by the Japanese.

We hope that a reduced number of marine mammals taken by the Japanese will result in a reduced number of Western and Interior Alaska salmon harvested by the Japanese fleets.