

Governor Sheffield urges support of Treaty

JUNEAU--With more coastline than any other state, Alaska is the scene of many a high drama on the high seas. And this past week has been a good illustration of that.

For example, we all know about the gas blowout in Cook Inlet, where an oil and gas platform was evacuated near Trading Bay. That's the bad news. The good news is the blowout apparently sealed itself without any loss of life or property.

In Tokyo, meanwhile, the United States and Japan are sitting down now to negotiate an end to the high-seas capture of Alaska salmon. Alaska is taking part in those talks, and I'm hopeful they'll be successful, because far too many salmon are lost before they return to our shores. While the talks with Japan are the good news, the bad news is Taiwan continues to fish for Alaska salmon on the high seas. And I've asked the State Department to take action by cancelling other fishing agreements with the Taiwanese unless they lay off our salmon.

On top of those developments,

we saw the first meeting of the U.S. side of the Pacific Salmon Commission, set up to implement the treaty between Canada and the United States. That treaty is good news for our fishermen because it will ensure the long-run survival of salmon runs in Southeast Alaska. The bad news is we've yet to get any federal funds to implement this international treaty, but we're working on that front in Washington.

So between Washington, D.C., Tokyo, Seattle, and here at home in Cook Inlet, it's been a busy week—as usual—for the oil and gas industry, the fishing industry, and our state government. In spite of that, let me add one more development to the list.

This concerns the North Pacific fur seal.

Of all the marine mammals we have, none has been exploited more than the fur seal. But we have an opportunity this year to continue helping the fur seal make a comeback by extending a four-nation treaty. We've got a problem, however, in the U.S. Senate, where ratification is far from certain.

Why's that? The main reason is a concerted lobbying effort by a group of animal protection interests. What's ironic is the people working against extending the interim fur seal convention could very well see their worst fears come true if they win the battle in the U.S. Senate. Here's why:

Since the fur seal crosses many international borders, and roams the high seas, it's important we take a coordinated approach to managing the herds. So last October, the four nations involved in managing the fur seal got together and agreed to extend the convention to do that.

This convention is important for a number of reasons. For example, it promotes international research on the fur seal and also bans high-seas harvest of the fur seal. And as you may know, the fur seal was severely depleted decades ago because the herds were raided on the high seas.

Now, though, we have a very controlled harvest of fur seals on the Pribilof Islands. That harvest is actually good for the herds, culling out the single males who

wouldn't breed anyway. Moreover, it's very important to the culture and economy of the 1,000 residents of St. George and St. Paul.

Those communities are busy now building a fishing industry to take up the slack in their economy caused by the pull-out of federal support on the islands. But the seal harvest, in the meantime, remains a key element in the survival of their way of life. And as I said, there's solid proof the seal harvests actually help the herds, to say nothing of taking the pressure off salmon and other fish the seals eat.

So what happens with a negative vote in the U.S. Senate? I don't want to find out. If the U.S. pulls out of the fur seal convention, what effect will that have on other international fishing agreements we have with Japan, Canada, and the Soviet Union? I don't want to find out.

If the U.S. pulls out of the fur seals convention, will that lead to the resumption of other countries killing the fur seal on the high seas? I don't want to find out.

For that and many more



reasons, the fur seal convention should be ratified by the U.S. Senate. I've communicated these thoughts to our congressional delegation, and we're all in complete agreement. But in counting noses, the votes are still not there for ratification. Perhaps that will change in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, I hope you'll take a few minutes to write our congressional delegation in support of the fur seal convention. We've come a long way in managing this important marine mammal. This is no time to take a step backwards.