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SAFE TANKER BILL NEEDED

The operation of the trans-Alaska pipeline has dramatically increased the amount of tanker traffic in Alaskan waters. Because of the unusual productivity of our waters and the importance of the fisheries industry to the Alaskan economy, the safety of that tanker traffic is very important. To see that Alaska's waters remain clean, I intend to introduce a bill, "The Safe Tanker Preference Act," which provides systematic incentives to construct and operate the safest possible vessels.

Safe Tankers Preference is a new concept which supplements the traditional minimum construction standard criteria. The bill proposes a system for classifying oil tankers into three categories based on safety criteria. Vessels with the highest safety classification will be awarded priority in oil transport over lower classifications. This priority system will not only ensure that the safest tankers are used in the U.S. trade, but will also provide the economic incentives to add safety equipment which are now missing under the minimum construction standard system.

This legislation will not be a substitute for, but rather a supplement to, minimum tanker construction standards. The bill is consistent with international law and precedents which recognize coastal nations' rights to set reasonable restrictions and standards for vessels using their ports. Safe Tanker Preference also promotes upgrading safety standards for all vessels regardless of nation of registry. Implicit in this action is correction of traditional abuses in the name of economic expedience, which not only jeopardize the safety of our waters, but undermine development of our national maritime industry. We are all aware of the number of unsafe, American-owned tankers which fly a foreign flag as a matter of convenience.

Along with the priority incentives contained in the bill, the Coast Guard would be empowered to inspect, and when warranted, refuse port privileges to unsafe vessels. The rash of foreign tanker accidents off the coast of the United States has precipitated the introduction of some 14 bills on tanker safety regulation in 1977. This clearly reflects the heightened sensitivity of the Congress to this matter. The Safe Tanker Preference bill will offer the most comprehensive and constructive solution. It is realistic, pragmatic and positive in its approach to multiple conservation and maritime problems.