

United Nations considers driftnet ban

by Sen. Ted Stevens
for the Tundra Times

WASHINGTON, D.C. — It's a great feeling to see others take notice after you've plugged away at a problem for a long time.

That happened Nov. 3 at the United Nations when a proposed international moratorium that Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., and I requested on the use of driftnets was — in U.N. parlance — “officially inscribed.” We are the senior members of the Senate's National Ocean Policy Study.

It's the first step, and an important one, toward ending the use of plastic driftnets in our oceans.

Now that the resolution is before the U.N., the problem will receive international attention. Alaskans, and particularly Alaskans in the fishing industry, won't be fighting this battle alone.

For some years I have joined Alaskans and the fishermen of the North Pacific in calling for a ban on the use of plastic driftnets in the North Pacific. Two years ago Congress passed legislation that I sponsored, condemning the use of high seas driftnets.

Just this past summer, our government signed one-year monitoring and enforcement agreements with Japan, Taiwan and Korea as a result of that legislation.

That was progress. But it has become increasingly clear that we must act as a community of nations to end this scourge. One nation can't do it alone.

The United Nations' approval of the resolution would place international pressure on those governments condoning the use of driftnets. Equally as important, approval would alert the world to the threat posed by the plastic nets by all nations allowing their use.

Alaskans understand the devastating effects of plastic driftnets on our marine life, our seabirds and our marine mammals.

OPINION

Made of monofilament mesh, a single driftnet can stretch as long as 30 miles, hanging vertically in the water to a depth of 40 feet.

On any given day, as many as 30,000 miles of plastic net are set out by foreign fishing vessels. The nets are designed to harvest fish efficiently, and these nets are essentially non-biodegradable. So they become instead giant curtains of death for our marine resources.

Ghost nets, those set adrift or lost from vessels, float for decades, snagging every bird, every mammal, every bit of marine life in their paths.

Yet, the use of plastic driftnets by some nations has grown at an incredibly fast pace, with no regard to the loss of marine resources.

Salmon spawned in Alaska's waters have been lost by the millions to plastic driftnets before they can migrate to their home rivers and streams. Marine life of all species has been lost to the world — not just to Alaska — also by the millions.

There is no doubt that driftnets are the greatest threat to the world's marine resources in existence today.

What makes this proposed U.N. resolution even more significant is that for the first time our administration has gone on record in opposition to the use of high seas driftnets.

Over the past month I have had a series of talks with Secretary of State Jim Baker to discuss the introduction of this resolution.

As a first step Kerry and I worked

with our ambassador to the U.N., Thomas Pickering, to circulate a draft resolution in the U.N. It was met with interest. South Pacific nations, including New Zealand and Australia, whose fisheries are threatened, have added their requests for the moratorium.

Basically, the two-page document expresses serious concern that, in addition to targeted species, non-targeted species of marine life — including

It calls on all those involved in plastic driftnet fishing to cooperate in collecting scientific data on the impact of such fishing methods, recommending a review by the member nations by June 30, 1991.

The effective date gives those nations which have already signed agreements with us the time to carry out their commitments. Their efforts could serve as a model for all the nations involved.

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those on the endangered list — become entangled and die in plastic driftnets.

The resolution recommends that the moratorium on high seas driftnet fishing begin by June 30, 1992. It would remain in place until all nations could agree that the unacceptable impacts of such practices can be prevented.

It further states that the moratorium would be in effect until the conservation of the world's living marine resources could be ensured.

Through the cooperation of the fishermen of the North Pacific, the members of the Senate's National Ocean Policy Study and the administration, we have come a long way toward solving the problem.

We're closer than ever to ending this crisis. U.N. approval of the moratorium would reinforce the growing global awareness that every one of us must be a responsible steward of the oceans' riches.

Alaskans, more than most, understand that fact.