

# Cowper: U.S.-Soviet friendship blossoms

by Gov. Steve Cowper

JUNEAU — In June 1988, some 80 Alaskans boarded an Alaska Airlines jet for a short hop across the Bering Strait to the Soviet Union. As it turns out, we also took a giant step forward in improved relations with our neighbors to the West.

Now, 15 months after that initial "Friendship Flight" between Nome and Provideniya, activity between Alaska and the Soviet Union is booming. Business deals are being worked out, school children and cultural groups are exchanging visits and Alaska's efforts are being recognized at the highest levels in Washington and Moscow.

Last month I returned from a 12-day trade and friendship mission to the Soviet Far East where Alaskans were treated as if we were long-lost relatives coming home. We found the Soviets eager for trade with Alaska and enthusiastic about renewed contacts with Alaskans.

Alaska holds special meaning for citizens of the Soviet Far East. During my visit, one high ranking official interrupted a formal dinner to recall in an emotional voice how American and Soviet pilots joined in the war effort to shuttle lend-lease aircraft from bases in Alaska to his hometown of Khabarovsk. Many Soviets we encountered still refer to Alaska as "Russian-America."

Residents of this vast and sparsely populated region, nine time zones from Moscow, nodded sympathetically as we described frustrations with our own national government. That's a significant trait we found we have in common — a sense of independence, the notion of doing things on our own.

The recent trip further enhanced relations between Alaska and the Soviet Union. We agreed to take advantage of our similarities and to work out our differences on a host of issues, including:

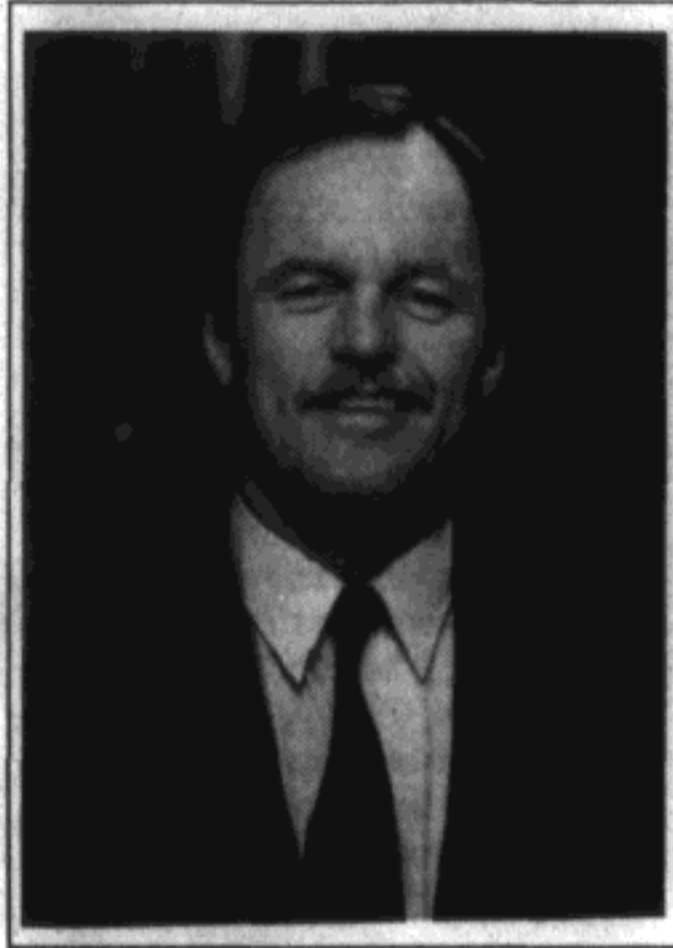
- Regular air service. This is the ticket to a long-term relationship between our regions, but pulling it off will require overcoming some major hurdles. Regular flights would not only ease passenger travel but permit cargo shipments and full-scale scientific and cultural exchanges. A recent trip to Alaska by officials from Khabarovsk took about 72 hours over a circuitous route that included Havana, Mexico City and Moscow.

The problem is this: the Soviets want more than the few dollars Americans would spend on souvenirs in exchange for a regular Alaska Airlines route between Anchorage and a major Soviet Far East city. But the demand by Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline, for reciprocal landing rights in a major western U.S. city such as San Francisco or Los Angeles seems unlikely to fly in Washington.

We discussed two options during my visit. First, I tried to convince the Soviets that regular U.S. service to their east coast would benefit them economically, as well as Alaska. Second, they proposed a possible joint Alaska-Soviet airline cooperative in which Alaska Airlines and Aeroflot would share expenses and profits.

Top officials of Alaska Airlines will be in Moscow this month to pursue this issue, and I have offered my services and my presence if needed.

- Easier visits for citizens. Just two weeks ago, Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze signed an agreement to permit visa-free travel across the Bering Strait between Alaska and Soviet Native people. Those visits,



anxiously awaited by relatives on both sides separated since the 1940s will be administered by a border commission.

In the meantime, the Soviets have proposed an Aeroflot charter to carry up to 80 business, government and scientific officials to Alaska to meet with their counterparts as early as this fall. The plane could then return to

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Khabarovsk, Alaska's sister territory, with a like number of Alaskans for several days of meetings designed to seal joint ventures.

I have called on the Soviet government to establish an Alaska office to ease visa procedures for such visits, and I plan to pursue that proposal

when I meet with the Soviets' San Francisco-based consul general this month in Juneau.

- Future relations. Because of the current flurry of joint proposals, we agreed to create an Alaska-Soviet Far East working group to streamline these efforts. The potential is enormous.

Ideas already on the table include a "Soviet Iditarod" from Nome to the Soviet coastal city of Anadyr, shipping Alaska goods to Europe year-round through the Great Northern Route along the Soviet northern coast using Soviet icebreakers, joint Soviet-Alaska management of North Pacific fisheries, an 11-nation Anchorage conference on life in the North and regular exchange of economists and teachers so we can learn more about each other's economic and political systems.

As I reminded our Soviet hosts during the recent trip, independent-spirited Alaskans rarely agree with each other on much. But a recent public opinion poll showed that more than 90 percent agree we should rekindle our friendship with the Soviet Union.