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SPONSOR STATEMENT

SENATE BILL 89

Shellfish Enhancement Projects

Senate Bill 89 will allow for large-scale enhancement projects for shellfish. Presently, all projects are permitted under a research permit, and are of limited size and scope. Thus, the outcomes have very little significance for populations. The technology for producing large amounts of juvenile shellfish has been developed, in part, with the use of State funds through capital grants and investment in hatchery infrastructure. SB 89 will further advance those investments into economic potential for all Alaskans.

Large-scale enhancement projects, especially for king crabs, have significant possibility for economic development. Eight of 11 king crab stocks in Alaska have been closed for many years. If successful, these enhancement projects could help reestablish localized populations, which could in turn provide breeding populations to help reestablish larger areas. Crabs produced from these efforts could rehabilitate once-robust commercial, sport and personal use fisheries throughout Alaska.

In addition, many of the hard-shell clam populations are at extremely low levels and no longer support any fishery. Projects involving the seeding of beaches have proven to be a useful tool for growing small populations. Large-scale plantings can bring back fisheries in rural areas, providing economic opportunity and food security.

Leveraging funds from grant sources and federal agencies has been hindered by the lack of enabling legislation for large-scale projects. The granting agencies would like to see a demonstrative example that the State of Alaska supports mariculture and shellfish enhancement. The enhancement programs will rely heavily on grant funds to achieve their potential.

The bill creates a regulatory framework with which Alaska Department of Fish & Game can manage shellfish enhancement projects and outlines criteria for issuance of permits. It sets out stringent safety standards to ensure sustainability and health of existing natural stocks. The commissioner of ADF&G must also make a determination of substantial public benefit before a project can proceed.

SB 89 plays an important role in the development of mariculture in Alaska by providing a method to increase the available harvest of shellfish for public use in an environmentally safe manner, and should ultimately improve Alaska's overall fisheries portfolio.