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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

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## My Turn: Bring fishing permits home

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In coastal Alaska, the number of locally held commercial fishing permits is steeply declining. That sentence might not mean much at first glance. Fisheries policies are notoriously complex even for the most studious Alaskans. It can be difficult to tell what a crisis looks like or when the red button should be pushed.

In 1983, Angoon had 183 locally held fishing permits. Now, 30 years later, there are only 15. In Nome, 157 permits have become 89. In New Stuyahok, 144 permits have become 21. Larsen Bay's 47 permits have dwindled to 15. These are not isolated incidents; this is a trend that can be found in every region of the state.

And if the numbers aren't convincing, a hearing on permit loss in the Alaska House fisheries committee this spring made it abundantly clear: This is a red-button moment.

Each lost permit represents a small business shuttering its doors. The effects are devastating, especially in rural places where the opportunities to participate in the cash economy are few. The \$100,000 that one fishing permit can generate magnifies into thousands of dollars around the community.

As permits leave, the opposite happens. The revenue decline creates a negative feedback loop that depresses rural economies at a faster and faster rate.

These relationships show that locally-held permits and salmon resource fishing revenue are vital to the economic health of almost every coastal region in Alaska. But if permits are so important, how are we losing them?

Alaska's limited entry permit system randomly distributes permits among potential owners: This means permits are expensive, and an arms race of capital and credit continues to drive up the price. Add the cost of a competitive boat to the \$160,000 for a Bristol Bay drift permit, and you could easily owe \$500,000 before you ever touch a fish.

Unfortunately for Alaskans, many potential owners are people from the Lower 48, and lines of credit aren't as accessible in New Stuyahok as in Seattle or San Francisco. We get out-competed.

Older generations of fishermen are retiring, but young Alaskans can't afford to buy in. Coastal economics depress further, so owners leave and take permits with them. More permits are lost through foreclosures, forfeitures and revocations.

It paints a bleak picture for Alaskan communities. Some think turning the trend around is impossible — rural Alaska should accept it and move on. For others, this is a completely unacceptable response — “moving on” is resigning ourselves to the slow depletion of coastal Alaska.

Decline is not inevitable. Twenty-three years ago, only 2 percent of the Bering Sea's fishing resource was owned by residents; the rest was controlled by non-Alaskans. After the creation of six Alaskan Community Development Corporations, residents now own more than 35 percent of the resource, and that level is rising. By developing CDQ groups, we turned around our federally-managed fisheries. Why can't we do it with our state-managed fisheries?

The Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation has been actively trying to stem the tide of permit loss for almost a decade. We estimate that Bristol Bay loses 15 permits a year. There were seven “saves” in 2014 — seven permits turned over to the hands of resident fishermen, the best year yet. But until that number is 15 or higher, Bristol Bay isn't even breaking even.

We need just two things to make it happen: We need to embrace new ideas and programs dedicated to keeping permits local, and we need legislators who will take advantage of opportunities to restore the economic engine of coastal Alaska.

Showing that permit loss is a systemic issue for coastal communities is the first step; getting them back into local hands is the next. Let's get a new generation of fishermen on the water.

Let's bring permits home.

- Norman Van Vactor is president of the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation and resides in Dillingham.



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