

Alaska Dispatch News

Group criticizes Alaska Gov. Walker on fisheries policy

Rashah McChesney | Associated Press
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JUNEAU — Fishermen, Alaska Native tribal members and clean water advocates on Wednesday criticized Gov. Bill Walker's administration over its handling of fisheries and water issues.

The group held a teleconference to discuss concerns and call on the administration to prioritize "fish first" policies.

Chief among their criticisms was a bill that Walker proposed to give the state Legislature deciding power over which waters in the state could be classified as so-called outstanding natural resource waters and offered special protections. Alaska must establish a process for designating such waters under the federal Clean Water Act, the state Department of Environmental Conservation has said.

Yakutat Tlingit Tribal Council member Raymond Sensmeier said legislative involvement will make it "a totally political process rather than a scientific one."

In a letter accompanying the bill, Walker wrote that a designation has the potential "to permanently limit development" and that given the far-reaching consequences the final authority should rest with the Legislature.

No waters in Alaska carry the designation, but there are pending nominations.

Bristol Bay fisherman Melanie Brown, of Juneau, said she disagrees with the governor's message. She said she's concerned that members of the Legislature would not allow nominations for protected water systems to succeed because they could limit industrial development.

"Lieutenant Governor Mallott and I remain committed to ensuring safe and sustainable fisheries and protecting the waterways throughout Alaska," the governor said in a statement. "We want to make sure that the voices of all stakeholders are heard as we work with the legislature, per the Constitution, to establish sound fish policy."