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SB 82-COOK INLET: NEW ADMIN AREA; PERMIT BUYBACK

SPONSOR STATEMENT

Senate Bill 82 is the result of sport and commercial fishermen in Cook Inlet working together toward a viable solution to conserve King Salmon. Alaskans aware of the struggles between user groups when it comes to Cook Inlet fisheries know that it is a rare occurrence for agreement on a major policy call that effects all of them. For decades there has been an unhealthy tension between commercial set net fishermen who fish on the east side of Cook Inlet and other user groups on the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers. This legislation will help alleviate a significant proportion of that tension.

SB 82 supports all user groups; commercial, sport, personal use and subsistence, providing relief by reducing the number of set netters in the east side set net fishery by nearly half. Thru reducing the number of set net operations on the east side of Cook Inlet we will see a more viable commercial fishery for those remaining and adequate production for the processing industry. We will also see more fish available for in-river users. The bill offers set net fishermen, some of whom have fished in the area for generations, a way to fairly exit the fishery or to reinvest in remaining operations once the 200 permit and site reductions take place.

In the 1980's there was a migration of set net fishermen to the east side of Cook Inlet. Returns were large, fishing in the area was lucrative and access to processors was easy. The appeal to commercial fishermen was irresistible. As pressure on stocks increased and commercial fishing profitability began to wane, processors began leaving the area. Over time, set net fishermen saw fewer and fewer opportunities to fish. In recent years there have been very few openings during the entire season. This year, the fishery has been closed by ADF&G order.

This voluntary program established by SB 82 would become effective only after an election held amongst the permit holders. Once established, permit holders would apply for the program and 200 permits would be drawn in lottery-fashion to determine the order of permit retirement. When a permit is retired, the waters where the permit was fished would be closed to future commercial fishing.

Improved King Salmon conservation and a more viable set net fishing industry make this concept a win-win for all user groups.

I respectfully ask for your support of this legislation for the benefit of all the salmon user groups on the Kenai Peninsula.