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Press Release

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Alaska Salmon Alliance Response to the Alaska Fisheries Conservation Alliance Inc. Ballot Initiative to Ban Set Net Fishing in the Cook Inlet Salmon Fishery

It is no secret that Bob Penney and friends have long been working to end commercial fishing in Cook Inlet. Their latest advocacy group incarnation, the Alaska Fisheries Conservation Alliance Inc., filed a petition on November 4, 2013, to effectively ban setnetting from five urban non-subsistence areas in Alaska. Their justification centers on exaggerated and wholly fallacious claims of the “indiscriminate high bycatch of all species of fish,” including Kenai River king salmon. These claims are based on something, but it certainly isn’t science or the best management practices of Alaska’s fisheries management system.

The Alaska Salmon Alliance (ASA), representing the seafood industry based on the Kenai Peninsula and in Anchorage, is dismayed by this latest action in the decades-long “fish war” that has consumed Cook Inlet’s fishing industries. The new group’s effort to manage salmon fisheries by ballot initiative represents a blatant disregard for science, the current management system, and the participation of all user groups in Cook Inlet fisheries. It is a public relations scam. The harvestable surplus of salmon in Cook Inlet far exceeds the capacity of non-commercial users, by the order of tens of millions of pounds. Who would it serve to eliminate a sustainable industry based on a renewable resource that generates hundreds of millions of dollars every year for the economy of Southcentral Alaska?

The ballot initiative to ban a century-old resident-based commercial setnet fishery is an incremental step to eliminating an entire industry. The public relations heat is poured on by the use of language that is inflammatory, bordering on slanderous. The new group’s web site calls setnets “indiscriminate killing machines.” In fact, near-shore setnet fisheries are among the cleanest net fisheries in the world. Other than flounder or the occasional spiny dogfish, these nets catch only salmon, as they are intended to do and as they have done here in Cook Inlet for over 100 years. Setnet-caught salmon are, due to the nature of their gear type and harvest area, some of the freshest and highest quality fish available from Cook Inlet. To eliminate their harvest would be a detriment to the exceptional salmon products Cook Inlet is known for world-wide.

The new Alaska Fisheries Conservation Alliance Inc. claims to be all about conservation, particularly of king salmon. While recognizing the importance of king salmon conservation everywhere, we think science and best management practices should be the basis of this analysis. The facts are:

- Kenai River late-run king salmon minimum spawning escapement goals have been met every year in the last 27 years, and exceeded in 9 of the last 10 years.
- The Kenai River is the most heavily fished river in Alaska, and hosts the most exploited freshwater king salmon fishery in Alaska.
- Cook Inlet East Side setnetters catch zero percent of the early-run Kenai king salmon and an average of only 13% of returning late-run Kenai king salmon, which includes a significant portion of jacks (small males).

What the new group does not address in their crusade to save the kings are the many serious in-river threats to the king salmon stocks. These include decades of hydrocarbon pollution, decades of targeting of trophy Kings by anglers altering the genetic stock, ignored mortality from chronic hook and release fishing, damage to main-stem spawning beds by huge numbers of boats and anglers and turbidity caused by bank erosion from foot traffic and boat wakes. (This turbidity problem has become severe enough to warrant an impaired listing under State of Alaska water quality standards but the listing has been blocked by a special interest group who claim to be concerned about Kenai River habitat issues.) Setnetting in Cook Inlet has been in use for over 100 years. The intense sport fishery in the Kenai River has only been going on for the past 20 years. Which do you think is more sustainable?

We founded the ASA to spearhead a public education and community outreach program in the greater Cook Inlet Region, with a focus on science-based management, habitat protection and restoration, and to seek long-term, inclusive solutions to the complex issues involved in Cook Inlet salmon fisheries. To this extent, we are promoting themes of all-inclusive collaboration and sharing of the resources amongst all user groups.

The ASA is taking an active stand against this irresponsible ballot initiative, and encourages all Alaska residents to do the same. To learn more about this issue, you can visit the ASA website at www.aksalmonalliance.org or find us on Facebook.

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