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Web posted June 12, 2006

Stevens presents fish farm permitting bill to Congress
Senator supports plan from Bush, but with 200-mile shore limit

the associated press

FAIRBANKS - Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens supports a new fish farm permitting system proposed by the Bush administration, but wants states to have the option of banning the industry within 200 miles of their shorelines.

The state has no say about what goes on in federal waters under the current legislation, Stevens said at a hearing on the bill. Stevens sponsored the bill, but wants it amended to give states the veto power.

He also wants regional fishery management councils to have more authority over offshore farms. The eight regional councils set fishing rules in U.S. coastal oceans and are largely made up of state, federal and industry representatives from the areas they regulate.

The administration bill recommends, but does not require, that the U.S. Department of Commerce consult with the councils on fish farming environmental questions.

An amendment from the bill's co-sponsor, Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, would require such consultation.

"They have no right to build in the 200-mile limit without the regional council's agreement, and if that's not clear then we'll make it clear," Stevens said.

Dave Bedford, deputy commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game also recommended a five-year moratorium on new aquaculture operations to allow more research on their ecological and socio-economic effects. The federal government should also promote wild seafood and limit the growth of farm fish production so it doesn't flood the market, he said at the hearing.

Bedford said finfish farms are illegal in Alaska because they "pose a potential threat to the health of Alaska's fisheries, our economy and our way of life."

Escaped fish can compete with natural fish, give them diseases and weaken their genetic makeup, said Tim Eichenberg, Pacific regional director of The Ocean Conservancy.

Eichenberg testified that fish farming on the scale recently endorsed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration would "discharge annually the nitrogen equivalent of the untreated sewage of 17 million people." He recommended that the bill include standards for such pollution.

Randy MacMillan, president of the National Aquaculture Association, disputed Eichenberg's testimony, saying research shows that both farmed and wild seafoods "are extremely healthy."

He said the federal Clean Water Act already provides a well-established way to regulate such discharges so they don't harm the environment, and he asked the

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subcommittee not to layer on additional rules.

MacMillan also warned the subcommittee not to give states unlimited control to cancel fish farming permits. "Business is not going to invest in offshore aquaculture in which a state can stop the aquaculture operation when they feel fit," he said.

The average value of Alaska's annual wild salmon harvest fell from \$500 million between 1990 and 1995 to below \$200 million in 2001 and 2002, due mostly to competition from cheaper farmed salmon.

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