

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF
DAVID BENTON
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
ON
H.R. 2798
THE PACIFIC SALMON RECOVERY ACT
BEFORE
THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION,
WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
MAY 18, 2000
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For the record my name is David Benton. I am the Deputy Commissioner for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and serve as Alaska's Commissioner to the U.S./Canada Pacific Salmon Commission.

The State of Alaska appreciates the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2798, the Pacific Salmon Recovery Act. We believe that funding of this nature will be instrumental in implementing the 1999 Pacific Salmon Treaty agreements, restoring healthy runs of salmon in the Pacific Northwest, and ensuring the continued success of salmon that use the marine waters and streams of the coastal Alaska region covered by the Pacific Salmon Treaty.

The State of Alaska and many Southeast Alaskan fishermen, biologists, and other fishing stakeholders were vital participants in the Pacific Salmon Treaty negotiations that were successfully concluded barely a year ago. The continued participation and sacrifices of Southeast Alaska fishermen made the treaty possible. The 1999 Treaty Agreements adopted conservation-based harvest arrangements founded on an abundance-based model for determining how many fish can be taken. While this is a new fishery management model for the treaty, Alaska has been using abundance-based management for many years.

When the new treaty agreements were discussed, there was recognition that additional sacrifices would have to be made by all the parties involved in the life cycles of the Pacific salmon species and stocks covered by the Treaty. The unified package of agreements forming the 1999 PST Annexes and Attachments constituted a commitment to implement a comprehensive set of programs and activities that address not only the fisheries, but also focused attention on scientific research, wild stock enhancement, and habitat. By taking a more comprehensive approach to salmon, it was more likely for abundance to increase and thus to have sustainable fisheries for the future.

A critical link in all of these agreements was a commitment to secure the funding to meet all of these obligations.

We are in the process of implementing the treaty agreements and abundance-based fishery management. While the Southeast Alaska chinook salmon fishery, in particular the troll fishery, has been greatly reduced over the years, this year may prove to be especially painful to both the troll fishery and the growing sport charter fishery in Southeast Alaska. Early projections based on the Pacific Salmon Commission chinook salmon abundance model show that more sacrifices from small Alaskan fishing communities will be required this year. As fishermen continue to make sacrifices to ensure that harvest plays its role in rebuilding stocks, they look forward to the day when today's sacrifices, combined with restoration of the degraded rivers of the Northwest, result in more abundant chinook salmon and larger harvests.

The 1999 Treaty Agreements recognized harvest reductions alone cannot and will not rebuild all of the salmon stocks covered under the agreement. The habitat must be there to support salmon when the fish return to spawn. This bill's focus on habitat is a critical link in rebuilding salmon stocks and preventing more Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings. Habitat must be restored, and tools and information must be developed to ensure habitat integrity is maintained. Unfortunately the bill, as drafted, does not contain the flexibility to address other needs that come out of the Pacific Salmon Treaty agreements.

For example, in Alaska, our situation is a little different than that of the Pacific Northwest where stocks are threatened or endangered, and habitat has been lost. This bill takes a narrow, ESA-oriented approach directed at habitat restoration, which may be appropriate for the Pacific Northwest, but not necessarily for Alaska. Although there are specific watersheds where habitat restoration and improvement activities are needed, Alaska's salmon habitat is, for the most part, intact. There are no salmon that spawn in the freshwater streams and rivers of Alaska that have been listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA. Now is the time to conduct the basic research needed in Alaska, gather the information needed to ensure the continued productivity of Alaska's salmon, and restore degraded salmon habitat.

We also believe that cooperative research with Canada and the Pacific Northwest tribes will enhance salmon recovery on a more coastwide basis and serve our mutual interests. We have earmarked some of our initial funds to work with Canada on transboundary rivers and the Pacific Northwest tribes on stocks of mutual interest, (specifically those that spawn in rivers to the south, but feed and mature in the marine waters off the shores of Alaska).

The following broad program areas reflect how the State of Alaska plans to allocate the \$14 million we received for Pacific Salmon Restoration in the federal FY00 appropriations bill:

- Salmon-related research and monitoring, including assessment of salmon habitat quality in coastal watersheds and transboundary rivers; development of fishery and fish habitat modeling studies; documentation of fish passage needs and in-stream habitat improvement needs in anadromous streams and watersheds; and assessment of the presence, if any, of contaminants in coastal salmon habitat and migration corridors. The information gathered from this research will identify the highest priorities for habitat monitoring and restoration projects.
- Salmon-related habitat restoration, including fish passage remediation projects such as road and culvert rehabilitation to increase salmon survival, improve water quality, and better serve transportation needs.

- Salmon-related mitigation for lost fishing opportunities, including a broad range of salmon fisheries projects recommended by Southeast Alaskans. To assist with project selection and provide oversight, experts in biological and fisheries science, along with Alaska fishing stakeholders and community leaders, will be involved in a public process to identify priority needs and opportunities.
- Salmon-related national and international cooperative habitat programs, including cooperative work with Canada and the Northwest treaty tribes on salmon stocks of common concern.

The language in H.R. 2798 should provide the flexibility to accommodate the differences between the habitat needs along the Pacific Northwest coast and the very real but different needs of Southeast Alaska. Such language should also be consistent with the Pacific Salmon Treaty agreement and be broad enough to include salmon-related research, monitoring, restoration, and mitigation.

Beyond the issue of greater programmatic flexibility in the use of these funds, State of Alaska has two administrative recommendations:

- 1) Provide funds directly to the states, as discussed in PST negotiations and intended in the 1999 PST agreements, rather than go through the process of drawing down funds from a NMFS account. Oversight of these funds should rest with the states, reporting directly to Congress as required in the FY 2000 authorization and appropriations statutes. To do otherwise requires that significant funds be allocated to NMFS to provide additional personnel to follow their grant regulations, thus resulting in twice the administrative costs (NMFS and State of Alaska) and reducing the amount of funds available for on-the-ground, salmon-related work. The PST commitments recognized the different needs in the states and intended to provide flexibility to address those needs.
- 2) Include language providing the states with flexibility with regard to fund matching requirements, so that each state may leverage the funds through in-kind matches or new resources in accord with the unique opportunities and limitations in each state.

The funds provided by Congress last year have set the stage for future appropriations to assist states and tribes in implementing the Pacific Salmon Treaty and ensuring healthy salmon runs. We appreciate the vital role Congress is playing in the future of salmon in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska and respectfully request your continued assistance.

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