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Salmon protection, resource development possible

A cursory review of the sockeye salmon ex-vessel prices over the last 20 years for various regions of Alaska reveal a consistent trend of some fisheries with better prices than others.

The sockeye from Prince William Sound commanded prices as high as \$1.57 per pound in 2005. Bristol Bay sockeye has been consistently the lowest, at 62 cents per pound in 2005, according to statistics from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Prince William Sound produces the highest price per pound for sockeye salmon. For the early run, the Copper River reds fetch upwards of \$12 per pound.

While there are experts who can undoubtedly explain all of the variations for market access, quality, availability and a myriad of other factors, I want to raise the question of how the low salmon prices in Bristol Bay may be affected by the development of oil and gas, mining, industrialization and urban sprawl and all that it spawns.

There has been no little fear cast on our fishermen by the



COMMENT

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For The BayTimes

specter of development in Bristol Bay as the death knell for all of our Bristol Bay fisheries.

We must be extremely careful and most diligent in our application of the best science to protect and enhance opportunities for subsistence, sport and commercial fishermen.

However, we need not paralyze our economy and stop responsible development with legislation to pre-empt the existing and rigorous requirements of the environmental impact statement and state and federal water-quality laws, in favor of a political solution to a perceived problem that may not be one at all.

The prized and valuable Copper River reds are gathering back at the Copper River, for at its headwaters is the famed Kennecott Copper Mine, which was discovered in August 1900. It produced copper and other minerals for 27 years, until 1938.

In 1989, the Exxon Valdez dumped crude oil in the Prince William Sound, creating the largest oiling of the marine landscape in Alaska history. Oil reportedly still remains buried in the gravel of the beaches of the Sound, within reach of anyone who cares to dig a little.

Yet in spite of this old mine located at the headwaters and the oiled Prince William Sound, Copper River reds remain at the top of the value totem pole for Alaska sockeye.

The sockeye price holding the No. 2 spot on the value per pound list belongs to Cook Inlet.

More than half of the state's population lives in the watersheds of Cook Inlet, and at last count, I observed 16 active oil and gas platforms operating in these waters where the salmon come through, not to mention all the potential for pollution as a result of the more than 350,000 people who live here.

Bristol Bay is last in value of sockeye per pound. How can this be? This is the last pristine place on earth. Bristol Bay is all that wild, pure, untarnished, natural, organic, delicious sockeye salmon stands for.

Before you jump to the conclusion that all Bristol Bay needs is a large mine at its headwaters, like the Copper River, and vigorous oil and gas development, like Cook Inlet, to bolster the value of its sockeye salmon, consider that what prices demonstrate most is that the headwater arguments and the "no development" arguments are a little overstated.

Those who think development would be devastating to our region and fisheries should entertain the idea that our other resources can actually be used and the subsistence, sport and commercial values of our fisheries can be enhanced.

Glen H. Alsworth Sr., mayor of the Lake and Peninsula Borough, has commercial fished in various parts of Alaska since 1967. He lives in Port Alsworth.