

## Public Comment to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy

Provided by: Karen Gillis, Interim Executive Director  
Bering Sea Fishermen's Association  
725 Christensen Drive, Suite #3  
Anchorage, AK 99501

The Bering Sea Fishermen's Association was designed to unify a variety of people, a variety of issues and a variety of goals. The challenge this brings is not unlike the Commission's challenge to develop a national ocean policy. The obstacles we've defeated as an agency have afforded us the opportunity to represent 193 communities and just over 114,000 members.

The Bering Sea Fishermen's Association began in 1979 with 150 fishermen from over 30 villages in western Alaska ranging from Bristol Bay to Kotzebue Sound. These fishermen united to become more involved in new fisheries that were developing in their backyard, and to build an organization that was concerned with helping local fishermen gain full economic benefits from existing local commercial fisheries. Today BSFA is directed by a 13 member board made up of local fishermen from Bristol Bay, the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta, Norton Sound, Kotzebue and St. Paul.

Over the past 23 years, BSFA has been involved in a wide variety of ventures:

- Monitored the high seas by-catch issues
- Participated in developing the High Seas Driftnet Ban through the United Nations
- Created the Community Development Quota (CDQ) Program
- Implemented the Bristol Bay buy-back Coalition
- Assisted with negotiations for the US/Canada Yukon River Salmon Agreement
- Contributed to the Magnuson-Stevens Act re-authorizations
- Conducted niche marketing of Western Alaska salmon
- Organized the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association
- Organized the Western Alaska Fisheries Development Association
- Initiated the fisheries feasibility studies in the Chukchi Sea

In addition to monitoring current issues on behalf of village fishermen, BSFA also administers and directs scientific research. In the summer of 1993 many chum salmon runs in western Alaska unexpectedly failed to return in any numbers, which brought commercial and subsistence disaster to its residents. Subsequently, Congress provided funds that it hoped would help restore and enhance these runs. Since 1994, BSFA has been providing these research funds to help restore the depressed salmon stocks in Western Alaska. The priority is to include local organizations and residents to the fullest extent. All our projects are developed in collaboration with appropriate state, federal and local agencies involved.

Of great concern to our organization is the health and condition of our oceans. The oceans ecosystem is a labyrinth of physical and biological relationships. It must sustain the influences of human activities and interactions. The Bering Sea ecosystem is experiencing a regime shift toward the scarcity of once-abundant resources, as evidenced by declining populations of salmon and Steller sea lions. This has been a wake up call to begin focusing attention on this vast ecosystem. We must accept the responsibility to work together and coordinate our efforts. Those in positions of power must recognize the cultures, and stakeholders that are at risk.

The Essential Fish Habitat provisions in the Magnuson-Stevens Act encourage an ecosystem management approach. It will be critical to this Commission to understand what ecosystem management means, and answer the ultimate question, which is, can an ecosystem be managed?

We need to start with balancing the multitude of management agencies that don't currently see eye to eye on priorities for managing our fish and wildlife. The obvious lack of agreement on what constitutes a healthy ecosystem is problematic. There is a serious lack of scientific data. Climate change, predation, food supply, contamination, interception and human influences all contribute to changes in the Bering Sea.

Fisheries are high-risk enterprises. Numbers and markets do rise and ebb, and at the low ranges in fish numbers, there is economic pain. But in much of western Alaska in the recent past, and this year too, people are experiencing extremely low numbers along with lower market prices. The pain, therefore, both economical and psychological, is extreme.

For our members it is imperative to understand what factors are contributing to the unexplained drop in western Alaskan chum salmon populations in recent years. Most recently this organization has been involved in the Western Alaska Sustainable Salmon Initiative, a cooperative salmon research planning and funding initiative aimed at addressing the need for expanded research on the decline of salmon stocks in the Arctic, Yukon and Kuskokwim regions. The Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, Association of Village Council Presidents, Kawerak, Inc., Tanana Chiefs Conference, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Geological-Biological Research Division have formed a new and innovative partnership to better understand and attempt to reverse this devastating decline in salmon stocks. We are committed to collaborative research that eliminates duplication and promotes cooperation.

The process is as important as the product.

Clear lines of authority among agencies and better communication are paramount. Many current fishery problems are the legacy of a misplaced belief in the inexhaustibility of marine resources. Our task and yours requires the involvement of every person, from the subsistence user to doctors of science to commit themselves to implementation of the idea of healthy oceans for generations to come.

Thank you for your time, please call on us, and good luck to you.