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Senator Robin Taylor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Oct. 10, 2001
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Taylor Takes Fish Farm Concerns to Task Force

(JUNEAU) – Sen. Robin L. Taylor (R-Wrangell) repeated his warnings of the growing threat that fish escaping from Northwest fish farms pose to Alaska's commercial fishing, in a recent speech to U.S. lawmakers.

Addressing the Pacific Fisheries Legislative Task Force's annual meeting in Astoria, Oregon, Taylor said recent developments have borne out his longtime warnings that the increasing numbers of farmed salmon escaping from British Columbia fish farms brings disease, diminished food supplies and other damage to Alaska's wild salmon.

"I have always opposed fish farming in Alaska on the grounds that it poses an unacceptable risk to the wild Pacific salmon fisheries that have so long been a foundation of the Southeast Alaska economy and way of life," Taylor said. "While I had been assured these fears were unwarranted, new evidence shows that the release of significant numbers of farmed Atlantic salmon into the wild has moved from disturbing possibility to dangerous reality."

Presenting information from Phil Doherty of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Taylor showed that the government of British Columbia has tacitly acknowledged the problem, and is implementing a plan to use scuba divers armed with spears to kill stray Atlantic salmon found in B.C., Washington and Alaska streams.

He noted that Atlantic salmon have been caught in Alaska's commercial fisheries in increasing numbers, and also found upstream in Alaska rivers, raising the possibility that they could spawn and expand their foothold in the open ocean. The evidence gives the lie to fish farming experts who had asserted that the smaller, less hardy Eastern salmon could not survive in the colder Northwest marine environment, Taylor said.

This is Taylor's third year on the task force, which is made up of legislators from Alaska, California, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. Those attending the two-and-a-half-day meeting also heard from other specialists in marine biology and Pacific fisheries management issues.

"Alaska's fisheries are threatened today by some of the same forces and special interest groups that attacked and killed the timber industry," Taylor said. He noted that the National Marine Fisheries Service and other federal agencies are moving forward to create Marine Protected Areas, essentially wilderness zones, where commercial activities such as fishing will be excluded.

"The Pacific Fisheries Legislative Task Force is monitoring these issues and will provide information to federal agencies with an eye toward protecting our commercial fisheries, and I hope for the sake of Alaska's economic and cultural future that it is successful in these efforts," Taylor said.

Other Alaska state legislators attending the task force meeting include Rep. Fred Dyson (R-Eagle River), Rep. Gary Stevens (R-Kodiak) and Sen. Kim Elton (D-Juneau).

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