

Candidates to talk fish at conference

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For the Journal

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It takes guts to talk fish, but five candidates hoping to snag Alaska's lone seat in the U.S. House of Representatives will take on the challenge next month in Kodiak.

Congressman Don Young and Gabrielle LeDoux, both Republicans, and Democrats Diane Benson, Ethan Berkowitz and Jake Metcalfe have agreed to participate in the well-known fisheries face-off. The catch: the debate is limited to fisheries and the seafood industry.

Since 1990 the fisheries debates, which kick off the annual ComFish Alaska trade show, have attracted nearly 100 percent participation by candidates for Alaska governor and U.S. Senate. This year will be the first time that U.S. House candidates participate.

The big hook is that the debate is broadcast live to more than 330 communities across Alaska via KMXT/Kodiak and APRN.

“The fishing industry is Alaska's number one private employer and produces more than half of our nation's wild seafood. This debate allows the candidates to share their knowledge and ideas about this vital industry,” said Deb King, director of the Kodiak Chamber of Commerce, which is the sponsor of ComFish.

Young, who has warmed the House seat for 35 years, was the first to take the bait.

“The commercial fishing industry is a vital part of Alaska's economy. It is the lifeblood of many of our communities, and an important part of Alaska's future,” he said via e-mail.

Kodiak's LeDoux, who said she's hoping for a hometown advantage, agreed.

“The fishing industry is one of the top money makers for Alaska. The ComFish debate provides a unique opportunity to tell Alaskans how much we value this vital industry,” she said.

“Commercial fishing is more than just a job for many Alaskans, it's a defining lifestyle,” said Metcalfe, of Juneau. “Anyone who wants to represent fishermen should take advantage of any opportunity to meet with them, and to respond to their concerns.”

“ComFish is Iowa and New Hampshire rolled into one,” said Anchorage-based Berkowitz. “I want to keep Alaska's coastal communities strong and make sure our fisheries are sustainable. I appreciate that the people of

Kodiak are never shy with their opinions.”

The fisheries debate takes place at the Kodiak High School auditorium on March 20 from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Check out all the events at www.comfishalaska.com.

Alaskans, including Gov. Sarah Palin, were to converge on the nation's capital late last month. They planned to be in the room on Feb. 27, when the U.S. Supreme Court was scheduled to hold hearings that would decide if Exxon must pay \$2.5 billion in punitive damages to 32,000 plaintiffs hurt by the 1989 oil spill.

Alaska stakeholders last month launched a Web-based “Whole Truth” campaign to counter Exxon's claims that there are no lingering effects from the oil spill, nor is any more money due.

“Most cases are tried both in the court and in the court of public opinion,” said Steven Smith, spokesman for Prince William Soundkeeper and Cordova District Fishermen United. “We hope to raise the awareness of everyone in America to be watching this case. Maybe it will make the court nervous about favoring big business over doing what's right.”

Smith believes implications of the Supreme Court decision go well beyond a settlement with Alaska fishermen, and pose a threat to the Clean Water Act.

“If Exxon gets a ruling that they are not responsible and don't have to pay punitive damages, it does not speak well for our waters all over the world. If there is no downside to being careless, then why spend the money to be careful?” Smith said.

According to CDFU Director Rochelle Van den Broek, Gov. Palin was slated to speak about the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. on Feb. 26. That was to be followed by a candlelight vigil on the National Mall starting at 6 p.m.

“This is our last big shot to maybe influence the decision that will be made,” Van den Broek said.

Pooling production and purchasing power can yield some nice advantages for fishermen. Find out the pros and cons in “Developing Cooperatives for the Alaska Seafood Industry.” (www.alaskaseagrant.org)

Food producers usually form co-ops when they are frustrated by markets or supply costs, said Alaska Sea Grant marine advisory agent and co-author Glenn Haight.

“By coming together they can demand more of a presence in the market,” he said.

Haight cites the Seafood Producers Cooperative in Sitka as a prime model. The 500-member SPC began in the 1940s and is one of the largest and most

successful fishing co-ops in North America. Kodiak's Olga/Moser Bay Seafood Producers Alliance is another good co-op example. Four years ago setnetters there created a slick system that flies their fresh salmon directly to high-end buyers in Chicago.

Most recently, Kodiak trawlers tested the waters for a co-op in the rockfish fishery. The slower pace extended the fishery from three weeks to seven months, keeping more seafood workers on the job longer. By fishing cooperatively, the trawlers cut halibut bycatch rates by more than 70 percent. Click here to return to story:

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