

UNITED SOUTHEAST ALASKA GILLNETTERS

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January 4, 2018

Mayor Jensen
Petersburg Borough Assembly
PO Box 329
Petersburg, AK 99833
Sent via email: mayorjensen@petersburgak.gov

Dear Mayor Jensen:

United Southeast Alaska Gillnetters appreciates the opportunity to weigh in on an issue that is very important to our fleet. Many of our members are active in the Dungeness crab and dive fisheries and have felt the direct impact of sea otter predation. Gillnetters in general are interested in having a robust Dungeness fishery as the summer season for crab coincides with the salmon season. In years of high crab abundance, many gillnetters will choose to pursue the crab fishery over gillnetting, reducing congestion and allowing for a higher individual average salmon harvest for the fleet. Both the Dungeness and dive fisheries are important “shoulder fisheries” in the fall season for the gillnet, troll, and seine fleets, extending the fishing season and providing economic diversity for these fleets as well as coastal communities.

The current management regime for sea otters appears to allow the population to grow to what the National Fish and Wildlife considers the natural population back before the fur trade diminished the species to near extinction. While this would appear noble enough, it ignores the fact that this rapidly growing population is diminishing Alaska’s shellfish resources. Resources residents depend on for their livelihood, subsistence, and personal use.

Currently, only coastal Alaska natives are allowed to harvest sea otters. They may sell “significantly altered” hides, usually tanned and sewn into clothing, blankets, hats, etc. These articles may only be sold domestically. This is a low volume market, as fur has not been a fashionable article domestically for decades. Harvesting, skinning, the expense of tanning, designing, and finally sewing are all part of the process to make something that may or may not sell in a timely fashion. The time and expense involved require a rather high price point to

justify. This makes sales rather slow and in turn, slows the harvest, which allows sea otter populations to grow. The current harvest rate has done nothing to keep the population of otters from growing and expanding their range into more of the remaining commercially viable areas left.

Our conclusion would be to increase the harvest rate. The best way to accomplish this would be to allow the sale of raw sea otter hides on the international fur market by Alaska coastal natives. This would expand the market and allow native harvest to increase. The resource could be managed as a renewable resource, providing income for Alaska natives that may not be able to afford or have the skills necessary to prosecute the steps that would allow them to use the current system. In our estimation it would have very little impact on the current users as there are plenty of otters to allow harvest for existing businesses and this proposed new access. This expansion to more markets for these furs will not compete with the existing markets available to users. The customer base and uses of furs are and will remain distinct.

Moving forward, it would be great if some steps could be taken at the federal level to address the problem that the state of Alaska has chosen to remain mute on. Alaska's silence while we have watched state resources dwindle, impacting coastal communities, retarding investment and economic growth, toward an end that is stoppable, is infuriating.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Max Worhatch', with a stylized, flowing script.

Max Worhatch, President