

My Turn: Alaska's senior senator is with us

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Last week, the majority of representatives from Alaska's commercial fishing organizations sat with U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to talk fish. When asked about protecting the interests of Alaskan fishermen from large-scale mining proposals upstream in Canada, fishermen's questions were direct and her answers were clear: Murkowski is committed to bringing our concerns to the highest level of international and federal government and providing guarantees for Alaska's fishermen. Southeast Alaska's fishing and tourism-based economies are a powerhouse, and we currently bear 100 percent of the ecological burden and risk from these Canadian operations and have no assurance of financial compensation if something goes wrong.

I have commercially fished for salmon in Southeast Alaska for many decades and am a lifetime member of United Fishermen of Alaska (UFA). With longtime involvement in fish politics, I've heard many promises from our Congressional delegation over the years. However, I can say with confidence, when it comes to addressing this critical environmental threat facing Southeast Alaska fisheries, Murkowski's response to concerns about the long-term health of our Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers has been clear and active as Southeast Alaskans have called for legally-binding protections and financial assurances from the United States and Canadian federal governments.

Last week, during the senator's address to UFA, a Bristol Bay fisherman thanked her for her successful work in the mandate to require labeling of genetically engineered salmon, and then asked how she was approaching the growing calls from thousands of Alaskans sharing their concerns over mining in B.C. that could impact our three major salmon rivers in Southeast. Murkowski reassured board members that she is committed to moving this issue to the higher levels of the State Department. She even suggested that she was disappointed in the lack of engagement from the State Department thus far. Commenting on the Boundary Waters Treaty and its adjudicating body, the International Joint Commission, the senator stated the IJC is, "an effective stick – an international tool that we have at our disposal – and it's only effective if used. ... If you don't take steps, it won't go." She gets it.

I would also like to thank Rep. Daniel Ortiz, I-Ketchikan, for inquiring about this statewide issue during the senator's legislative address. We are grateful when our elected officials hear our concerns to protect and promote wild Alaska fish for future generations and ensure our concerns are addressed by international governing bodies that have the power to assure us that Southeast Alaska's culture and economy won't be threatened by mining in B.C.

- Bruce Wallace is a commercial fisherman living in Juneau.