

Fish fights take center stage in Alaska Senate race

By Ian M. Stevenson

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The plight of the state's fisheries, some of the most productive in the world, has become a flashpoint in Alaska's Senate race and arisen as a potential weakness for two-term incumbent Dan Sullivan.

Sullivan faces a tough reelection bid against former Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola, who has centered her campaign around "Fish, Family, Freedom." She's trying to harness anger at out-of-state commercial fishing to win her way back to Congress.

Alaska hosts some of the largest commercial pollock fisheries in the world as well as major salmon populations — buttressing a seafood industry that supports more than 15,000 Alaskan jobs with around [\\$5 billion in value](#). Many Alaska Natives harvest fish from the state's mighty rivers and rely on the catch during winter.

Precipitous population declines in recent years that threaten commercial, sport and subsistence fisheries are shaping the election ahead of November. While some voters back the trawling industry for its economic contributions, other Alaskans are upset they cannot fish some rivers in the state anymore while huge commercial fisheries in the ocean continue to thrive, and Peltola's campaign wants to pin that on Sullivan.

"In the West, you fight over water. In Alaska, you fight over fish," said Robert Dillon, a political consultant. "You've got a limited resource and a lot of different groups that depend on it."

Peltola is trying to win in a state that favored President Donald Trump in all three of the last presidential elections. At stake is control of the U.S. Senate.

Fisheries in decline

Over the last decade, Pacific cod, snow crab, Chinook salmon and chum salmon have suffered steep population drops tied to ocean warming, according to Franz Mueter, a fisheries professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

These declines have led to the closing of many waterways in the state to Chinook salmon fishing, including to thousands of Alaskans fishing to feed themselves and their families. The Yukon River watershed Chinook fishery has been entirely closed for seven years, with some state leaders shipping frozen fish to in-need communities.

"The cultural importance of salmon to the communities up and down the Yukon is hard to overstate, and that's why there's so much concern and controversy over all of this," Mueter said.

Meanwhile Alaskans are seeing pollock trawlers, who fish the largest fishery in the U.S. using huge nets in the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska, catch millions of pounds of salmon, crab, halibut and other fish they don't intend to, an occurrence known as bycatch.

For many fishermen, the situation is confounding: While a flotilla of large-scale operators continue to catch and discard many fish, smaller-scale inland fishermen must go without.

"They've had this resource taken away from them in order to try and sustain the fishery, and yet the trawlers out there [in the ocean] have not been told you can't catch any kings," said Bill Nelson, a retired commercial fisherman in Kenai who supports Peltola. "It's not fair." "Kings" are a term for Chinook salmon.

Whether that bycatch and the effects of trawling on marine life are a significant threat to the survival of key species has become a roiling debate in Alaska, with industry representatives maintaining that the declines are not driven by their catch.

That's led the trawling industry to feel unfairly targeted by residents concerned about fisheries.

“It's easy to point fingers at the trawl fishery. The question is — would it actually help the salmon runs on these rivers?” said Julie Decker, president of the Pacific Seafood Processors Association, which represents trawling and other seafood companies.

Decker maintains the industry is not the driver of stock collapses, and that closing the fishery would not bring about their recovery.

Further stoking the controversy is the fact that many of the trawling boats are based in Seattle, leading some Alaskans to conclude that out-of-state moneyed interests are extracting the state's natural resources. And multiple voting members of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, a NOAA institution which manages the marine fisheries, have ties to the fishing industry.

“They're taking and taking and taking, and Alaska and the people who live here and our oceans and rivers are really feeling the harm of all that extraction,” said Cooper Freeman, Alaska director at the Center for Biological Diversity. While many of the problems are linked to climate change, “there's a lot of damage being done from the trawl fleet.”

Diana Evans, executive director of the NOAA council, said scientific research indicates “ecosystem challenges” are the primary driver of declines but that bycatch is a “contributing factor” for which the council has “implemented numerous measures aimed at minimizing fisheries impacts and continually improving management.”

Evans said NOAA's general counsel reviews financial disclosure and recusal requirements before each council meeting to ensure compliance with federal law.

Waterways to airwaves

Peltola's campaign and independent groups have spent at least \$700,000 on political ads targeting the trawling industry, according to the ad intelligence agency, AdImpact.

David Bayes, an Alaska charter fisherman who moderates a Facebook group with more than 60,000 members called “STOP Alaskan Trawler Bycatch,” said he's heard from political campaigns across Alaska that candidates are getting “pummeled” with questions about trawling.

Alaskans Against Big Trawl, for one, has framed the issue as one of big-business fisheries profiting while Alaskans “pay the price.” The campaign is backed by a state-based group called the 907 Initiative, which Executive Director Aubrey Wieber said operates as a hub for the state's “progressive ecosystem” and has spent about \$200,000 on the effort.

The trawling issue “bubbled up from the grassroots,” she said, and has become mainstream while crossing the political spectrum.

A pro-fishing industry group, called Securing Alaska's Future, has countered with a campaign emphasizing how exports of the state's seafood lowers household expenses. The group did not respond to a request for comment.

Another group with a similar campaign, called the Truth Alaska, seeks to emphasize the economic impact of the fishing industry and its bycatch reduction efforts.

Rick Whitbeck, the group's executive director, said in an email that its focus is on disseminating that the industry “operates under extensive federal management and comprehensive monitoring, and supports thousands of jobs, numerous communities and economic activity across Alaska.”

Dillon, the political consultant, said Alaska Native groups have not been turning out for Democrats in recent elections and that shoring up support with Native voters could be a key constituency for Peltola to win.

“They've got to figure out how to reverse that,” he said.

Polling from Data for Progress, a left-leaning group, found that [nearly three in four Alaskans](#) support banning trawling, including majorities of both parties.

Trawling Sullivan

Peltola has sought to tie Sullivan to the trawlers and position herself as the ideal candidate to tackle the issue. It's an extension of what earned her a seat in the House.

When Peltola burst onto the national political scene to win a 2022 special election House race, she centered fisheries in her campaign. A former executive director of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, she is credited by some with raising the profile of the state's issues with fish.

"She really added to that snowball effect we've seen," Bayes said.

On the campaign trail, she has emphasized her family's history of salmon fishing on the Kuskokwim River and is calling for banning factory trawling.

She's pointed to campaign donations Sullivan received from the trawling industry as evidence he won't take action on the issue.

"Out-of-state trawlers are collapsing our runs, and our leaders refuse to act," Peltola said in a recent social media post.

In a statement, a Peltola spokesperson said Sullivan "and his Lower 48 factory trawl donors will do everything in their power to avoid accountability for enabling the decline of Alaska fisheries."

"Alaskans see a clear choice this November: Dan Sullivan who will put the Seattle trawl fleet before Alaska fishermen at every turn, or Mary Peltola, a lifelong Alaska fisherman who will fight for bold solutions to restore Alaska fisheries," the spokesperson said.

Nate Adams, a spokesperson for Sullivan's campaign, said it's "dishonest for Mary Peltola and her D.C. allies to suggest contributions influence his policies because his record proves the opposite."

"Mary Peltola is doing what desperate candidates do when they don't have a record of their own to run on — they smear someone else's," Adams said.

Sullivan introduced the Bycatch Reduction Act, [S. 3579](#), which seeks to reduce trawl nets' contact with the ocean floor, collect more data on the issue and review the conflict-of-interest and recusal process for the NOAA Fisheries council.

Red herring

Complicating matters is the science behind the steep population declines, which points primarily to ocean warming trends, according to researchers.

While potentially beneficial for some species, like sockeye salmon, marine heat waves have killed off many prey species that Chinook rely on, while also raising their metabolism: a one-two punch that has left huge numbers of salmon to starve.

At peak levels in 2006-2007, bycatch were estimated to reduce the number of salmon returning to the upper Yukon River by 3-4 percent per year and between 2-8 percent in areas of western Alaska, according to Curry Cunningham, a fisheries professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

The estimate is lower now, in the one to 2.5 percent range, depending on location, in part because of efforts by the industry to reduce bycatch.

"It's certainly part of the problem, but it is not the major reason we've seen some of these larger scale declines in these stocks," Cunningham said. He said continued warming temperatures are likely to worsen the outlook for Chinook.

Mueter agreed.

Bycatch "makes it perhaps a little harder for the salmon to recover...but they're clearly not the main issue with the declines," he said.

NOAA regulators have for years set caps on the number of Chinook salmon bycatch allowed to be caught by industrial fishing fleets, and in February, regulators similarly set caps for chum salmon.

While trawling can have harmful impacts on habitats, Mueter said banning trawling is unlikely to happen.

“There are lots of legitimate reasons for criticizing them and the influence they have on management,” Mueter said. “But realistically, if you want to look at the environmental impacts, you have to figure out what is the impact on specific habitats, specific bycatch species, and then work on where we can make changes to reduce those impacts without closing down the fishery entirely if it doesn't make sense.”