

Murkowski Grills Blank on Observer Policy

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski questioned acting Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank on several ocean policy issues facing Alaskan coastal communities during a Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations Subcommittee hearing last week. Topics ranged from the federal fisheries observer program to Japanese tsunami debris clean up, among other things.

Murkowski pointed out that with the fisheries observer program expanding to smaller boats and the halibut fleet in the Gulf of Alaska, many fishermen are pushing for alternatives to having another person onboard. Blank said it was her understanding that electronic observing technology has not yet reached a point where it was reliable, but Murkowski said that was in dispute. The two agreed to have their respective staffs get together on the issue.

Blank also informed Murkowski of a 20-percent increase in federal funds for tsunami debris clean up on the shores of western states such as Alaska. The increase brings the federal total to \$6-million, which is in addition to \$5-million pledged by the Japanese.

Murkowski raised concerns over regional ocean planning proposed by the administration that could potentially set aside from development areas that are prime for offshore renewable energy and vital fish habitat.