Begich Continues Defending Alaska Salmon

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

A few weeks ago a Hollywood fitness guru wrote an article in People Magazine about the benefits of eating a diet rich in seafood, and decrying the difficulty in being certain you’re being served wild seafood instead of farmed.

The line from Harley Pasternak’s column that probably caught Alaska Senator Mark Begich’s attention was this: “You may be surprised to learn that wild-caught fish is not really superior to farm-raised fish….”

Of course, those are fighting words in Alaska.

“To say that farmed fish is better than sustainable, wild-caught Alaska seafood is totally wrong,” said Begich. “When you think of farmed fish, and the things that could happen and the things they have to pump into them to get them to grow faster, the disease that can occur from the habitats they’re in, compared to wild Alaska salmon? I think he was just missing the boat here.”

To be fair, Pasternak, who is also a television host and author of diet books, didn’t come right out and say farmed salmon is better than wild salmon. But he did point out two things that many readers may have had a hard time separating:

One, he said farmed fish is under fire for antibiotic, hormone and pesticide use; and Two, he said wild fish can be higher in mercury.

Which is true, but the mercury concerns apply to larger, longer-lived fish on the top of the food chain like blue fin tuna, swordfish and mackerel. What he didn’t say was that mercury is not considered a problem with short-lived, mid-level fish on the food chain, like salmon.

Not making that distinction brought down such a hailstorm of backlash in the comments on the People Magazine website, Pasternak had to comment himself to clear his position up.

“My goal,” Pasternak wrote, “is to … remind you that fish in general, are healthy. Some more than others.”

That’s certainly a sentiment Senator Begich could agree with, but did send People Magazine a letter, mostly to defend wild Alaska salmon over farmed fish.

“I hope People Magazine actually publishes it as a letter to the editor, because I think his piece in People Magazine – a lot of people read it,” the Senator said. “And we want to make sure the public – may they live in Alaska, may they live in the Lower 48 or anywhere in the world who picks up People Magazine and sees that article they have a much more balanced discussion of the issue of farmed fish versus wild Alaska salmon.”

This is the third time Begich has come to the defense of Alaska salmon this summer. He got Walmart to reconsider its dropping of Alaska salmon because it lacks the MSC certification, and he pressured a military contractor that was also going to stop serving Alaska salmon to our troops for the same reason.

“I see part of my job as not only to fight for the right kind of policies when it comes to these issues, but also obviously fight for Alaska and the interests we have, and fishing is a huge interest.”