

Begich: NGO Sustainability Certification Too Subjective

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The Responsible Seafood Certification and Labeling Act introduced this fall by Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski would prohibit any US federal agency from requiring the use of third party criteria or to certify seafood as sustainable. It came in response to a couple of federal agencies or contractors bypassing Alaska salmon because most of it now lacks endorsement by the Marine Stewardship Council.

Last week Senator Mark Begich said the MSC's certification model was too subjective, and that if the federal government wants to ensure the seafood it sources is sustainable and includes Alaska salmon; the procedure needs to change.

"So in order to solve that, you've got to take those NGO sustainable labels off; still keeping the goal of sustainable product, but not having some third-party group, through their own decision, what sustainability is. We determine sustainability by the standards we have set for our rebuilding of our salmon stock or whatever fish stock we may be talking about."

Begich said that a Senate subcommittee he chairs is working on doing just that; defining sustainable in federal law.

"One of the things we're looking at under the Magnuson-Stevens Act; as you know I chair that committee that deals with that, fisheries; is how we define sustainability. For example, you might have a fish stock that is just starting its rebuilding process; that does not determine sustainable yet, but the broad definition that they have today, they might include it, and that is not where we want them to go. So we don't want them to go from one extreme to the next extreme, if that makes sense."

He said that just because a fishery is authorized by the National Marine Fisheries Service, it would not automatically confer sustainability to it; there would still have to be standards to be met.

"By moving the labels off of NGOs, it does create this broader definition which we have to define and make it very clear what is sustainable. But we don't want NGOs to just randomly determine what that is."

If passed, the prohibition would apply to any federal agency's purchase of seafood, or the sale of seafood by a vendor on federal property.