

Laine Welch: Mixing-zone decision near for Alaskans

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FISHERIES

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KODIAK -- Alaskans will soon know whether the state intends to lift its ban on mixing zones in fish-spawning streams.

Mixing zones are stretches of natural water bodies used as industrial flushing tanks for mines, power companies and sewage-treatment plants. Last year saw a big push by state policy-makers to lift a longtime ban on mixing zones in lakes, rivers and streams. The Department of Environmental Conservation was scheduled to announce its decision in November, but since then there has not been a peep or a leak about the outcome.

The clock is ticking, however. DEC spokeswoman Nancy Sonafrank said the state must decide by Sept. 1 or begin the process over again.

The long delay stems in part from the measure's controversy. The DEC has reviewed more than 600 public comments, mostly opposed to mixing zones. Critics call it a move to favor big business over clean water and say it will tarnish the pure image of Alaska's wild salmon. The DEC counters with claims that mixing-zone wastes don't necessarily affect aquatic life and that the state will not authorize a mixing zone if it jeopardizes fish.

Sonafrank said the issue also was raised to "a higher decision level" than normal, meaning the state departments of Natural Resources, Fish and Game, and Environmental Conservation all must sign off.

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Laine Welch is a Kodiak-based fisheries journalist. Her Fish Radio programs can be heard on stations around the state. Her information column appears Saturday.

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