

# The Dutch Harbor Fisherman

*The Aleutians and the Pribilofs*

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## PATRIOTIC PERCH



A bald eagle appears to feel right at home beside the American flag as it waves in the Aleutian wind on board the Alaska Rose vessel at the Alyeska Plant dock.

Courtesy photo/Roy Morse

## Hovercraft to connect King Cove, Cold Bay

2-hour boat trip cut to 20 minutes

By Bonita Babcock

For The Fisherman

The ocean road from King Cove to Cold Bay will soon be made shorter.

King Cove will soon make history by becoming home to the only commercial hovercraft in the United States to regularly carry passengers.

The 93-foot hovercraft, Suna-X, named after the Aleut word for boat, can seat 47 passengers.

Scheduled roundtrip services from King Cove to Cold Bay are targeted to begin in mid-May, but the exact date will depend on first receiving the necessary U.S. Coast Guard endorsements.

The hovercraft was chosen as an alternative to a proposed 18-mile road project, which has been put on hold due to environmental concerns.

Until now, residents needing to travel between the Alaska Peninsula communities could do so only by regular boat, taking two hours and weather permitting, or by small five-person flights, limited to certain times of year and often cancelled or delayed due to weather.

In comparison, a ride on the Suna-X will only take about 20 minutes from King Cove to Cold Bay, which is the village's airport link.

See Page 16, Hovercraft

## Freshman lawmaker in the final stretch

Edgmon works late as Legislature nears end

By Dustin Solberg

Alaska Newspapers

One night, Bryce Edgmon's meetings in Juneau ended at 10:30. The following night, it was 11:30. The next, 9:30.

"Then back in the office before eight in the morning," said Rep. Bryce Edgmon, D-Dillingham. "I fully expect to have more of those days. But I fully enjoy the pace."



Edgmon

It's a good thing. As the 23rd session of the Alaska State Legislature prepares to wrap up crucial legislation on matters including the natural gas pipeline and education funding by its May 16 deadline, its members can expect a few more late nights.

During a recent afternoon telephone interview, Edgmon's lunch, pork adobo and rice, sat untouched. The food, among his favorites, came from the Filipino stand down the street, with a glass of water.

The pace is understandably busy, but what may surprise some observers is the relatively amicable tone of this year's session.

"The overall tone is much improved relative to the most recent sessions. There truly is a spirit of bipartisan cooperation," he said.

See Page 13, Edgmon

## Sounds of music enliven the senior center

Junior high students entertain on piano

By Lynda Lybeck Robinson

For The Fisherman

Friday, April 27 produced a typical spring day in the Aleutian Islands – calm, gray, and secretly preparing to snow.

It was anything but typical, however, at the Father Gromoff Senior Center in Unalaska, where community members gathered with the seniors in the dining room. Volunteers, including Mayor Shirley Marquardt, served the eager diners, and all prepared for the show.

Promptly at noon, the first of several school-age pianists approached the piano and began to play.

The room fell quiet as most seniors, smiling, turned their heads to listen. For the next 30 minutes, eight junior high school piano students played their favorite songs for the audience.

Maria Turnbaugh, a resident of the senior center, commented on how wonderful it was to hear such well-prepared music.

See Page 15, Music



Courtesy photo/Lynda Lybeck Robinson

Michelle Fernandez plays songs she memorized especially for senior citizens and community guests.

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# Sakhalin ...

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ing the borough government, are in support of oil and gas development onshore but not in the ocean, pointing to the industry's unproven oil-spill response measures.

Many residents on the North Slope have voiced these concerns at numerous public hearings held by the federal government in the villages.

"We speak so many times to deaf ears, and so many times they turned their backs on us," Hank said.

For Bristol Bay, development threatens a lucrative commercial fishing industry and one of the most endangered species of whales in the world — the North Pacific right whale.

Similarly, environmentalists fear development off Sakhalin Island is driving the Western Pacific grey whales to extinction.

Evgenny Konovalov of the Sakhalin Environmental Watch said runoff from industry has poisoned fish in the waters surrounding the two large offshore projects, causing the deaths of 100,000 pounds of herring in 1999.

The estimated economic value of sustainable commercial fishing at stake in Bristol Bay is more than \$2 billion a year, said Kelly Harrel of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council.

Oil and gas development is estimated to generate a total of \$7.7 billion dollars for the 25- to 40-year lifespan of the project, she said.

"There is no balance here. This does not make sense," Harrel said. "Do we really want to take the risk of drilling for oil and gas in our most important fishery?"



Beth Ipsen/Alaska Newspapers

**May Hank of Point Hope, Walt Parker, the U.S. chair on the U.S.-Bering Sea Forum, Kelly Harrel of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, Yury Podstavnov of Sakhalin Island and Meerim Kylychbekova of the Pacific Environment speak against offshore drilling during a press conference at Kaladi Brothers Café Conference in downtown Anchorage on April 30.**

The 5.5 million-acre block in Bristol Bay north of the Alaska Peninsula, technically known as the North Aleutian Basin, now being opening to a future lease sales is the same area that was up for sale in 1988.

Following the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, President George H.W. Bush and Congress imposed moratoriums on the area. The federal government bought back the \$95 million worth of leases.

However, times have changed.

The nation is in the grips of soaring gas prices and a dependence on foreign oil. In an effort to obtain energy sources, the government opened up a total of 84.5 million acres of Alaska ocean waters for development: 40 million acres in the Chukchi Sea, 33.5 million in the Beaufort Sea, 5.5 million in Bristol Bay and 5.5 million in the Cook Inlet.

Some Alaska Native organizations joined

forces with environmental groups in filing lawsuits against the federal government to stop or at least slow down the oil and gas lease development, claiming studies don't adequately gauge the cumulative effects on the habitat.

However, battles to slow down offshore drilling have been unsuccessful so far. Shell has plans to conduct exploratory drilling in two areas in the Beaufort Sea and conduct seismic studies on both Beaufort and Chukchi seas this summer.

Nevertheless, development has moved at a much slower pace than in Sakhalin waters.

Change has come at a blistering pace since development started in 1994.

At first, Russia welcomed the industry with open arms because it was seen as a much-needed economic boost.

"Russia was so eager for development,"

Kylychbekova said. "When the oil industry came in, they agreed to everything."

Now the government is trying to backtrack, but Kylychbekova said it's too late because the contracts were signed.

Instead, environmental groups are active in regulating oil industry and participating in the monitoring process. This process, similar to the issuing of impact statements in the United States, involves two steps: a government-sponsored review and an independent impact review, Konovalov said.

Konovalov believes the independent review does have a fair amount of sway.

However, the government drags its feet in monitoring the oil industry. Usually scrutiny only comes if there's a serious violation or just once a year. It also relies heavily upon information supplied by the industry it is trying to monitor, Konovalov said.



Photo courtesy/Bonita Babcock



Courtesy photo/Steve Cochran

**The Suna-X crew, top, Sonny Weiss, left, Paul Tobin, Gary Mack, John McGrath, Amberly Weiss, Rob Trumble and Rick Hodgson on board the craft. The Suna-X hovercraft, above, tests the waters after arriving at King Cove last summer.**

## Hovercraft ...

From Page 1

with Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage and the rest of the world.

With weather conditions often harsh, flying in between the mountains surrounding the village can be risky and at times impossible.

King Cove, population 800, has long been researching several solutions for a safe, reliable travel route to Cold Bay, population 88.

In 1998, Congress appropriated \$20 million for road and marine transportation improvements as part of the King Cove Health and Safety Act. These funds would eventually pay for the new means of transportation for residents of King Cove.

Costing \$9 million, the hovercraft, designed by Hoverwork Ltd., based on the Isle of Wight in England, was built by Kvichak Marine Industries of Seattle.

The Aleutians East Borough, owners of the Suna-X, hired John McGrath as the hovercraft project manager.

McGrath, a retired Canadian Coast Guardsman, trained Gary Mack of King Cove as captain, Amberly Weiss of King Cove as first officer, Paul Schaack of Cold Bay as pilot/first officer, and Paul Tobin of Canada as the Suna-X's engineer.

In addition, Rick Hodgson and Ernest "Sonny" Weiss have begun training as engineers and Rob Trumble as pilot.

Once Mack receives the U.S. Coast Guard endorsements, he will officially become the only certified hovercraft trainer in the United States, according to McGrath.

Tobin, the craft's engineer, has been on board the hovercraft project since the beginning.

Tobin comes from a medical background and prior to the hovercraft project worked on heart pacemakers in Canada. Grinning, he explained his reason for agreeing to come to King Cove to work on the project was simple.

"A pump is a pump," he said.

Passenger ticket prices, charter costs, and onboard vehicle ticket fees for the Suna-X have not yet been determined.

The Aleutians East Borough has hired Northern Economics, a professional economics consulting firm, to do an extensive analysis of project's related costs and expenses. Once the analysis is completed, fees will be determined.

Though official operation of the Suna-X has not yet begun, it has already served the community on several occasions since arriving last August.

The hovercraft has assisted King Cove Emergency Medical Services with several medical evacuations, which normally take more than two hours if done by boat.

Within the next few weeks, EMS personnel will train to load the ambulance on board the Suna-X.

The Suna-X's sister ship, launched in England in 2006 by Prince Edward, is the only other passenger-carrying hovercraft in the world and seats 133 passengers.



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