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## Honorable discharge?

### *Permit renewals revive platform pollution debate*

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Patrick Norman, chief of the Port Graham village on the southern Kenai Peninsula, said in recent years there have been times where people in his village catch a salmon with lesions or other deformities on them. The fish would be brought to the village for everybody to see, he said.

"We are concerned," Norman said.

But the bigger concern for the village is unseen contamination in salmon and other aquatic life they use to survive, he said.

Oil and gas companies that own offshore production platforms in Cook Inlet are in the process of having their discharge permits renewed by the Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates materials dumped from the platforms into the inlet. Every time the permit is renewed, there is the opportunity to change the restrictions of the

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The Environmental Protection Agency is in the process of renewing discharge permits for most of the production platforms in Cook Inlet.

*Photo by M. Scott Moon*

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permit.

Many of the platforms dump materials, such as produced water, drilling muds, drill cuttings, treated sewage and cooling water into the inlet.

Some companies and organizations point to studies that show discharges do not have negative effects on the environment. Environmental groups and Port Graham want dumping in the inlet to be forbidden.

National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits are required under the Clean Water Act for a variety of operations that cannot meet state and federal water quality standards at the end of the pipe, such as municipal water treatment plants.

For Cook Inlet oil and gas producers, the permit must be renewed every five years. During the renewal process, operators must submit data about operations and discharges, which will determine if the permit terms need to be modified, said Marilyn Crockett, deputy director of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association.

In Alaska, the EPA then reviews the data submitted by the companies, issues a draft permit, which is open for public comment and must be certified by the state, Crockett said.

Sometime later this year, the draft will be submitted for public comment. The federal register and advertisements will announce the start of the public comment period and ways to participate.

Throughout the repermitting process, the EPA gathers existing environmental data and talks with tribes, such as the Port Graham village about their observations, said Hahn Gold, project coordinator for NPDES permit reissuance at the EPA. Villages have observed declines in aquatic life in the inlet and thinner salmon, clams and mussels, Gold said.

There is no evidence that discharges from the platforms have had a negative environmental impact on the inlet, said John Zager, incoming general manager for Unocal Corp.'s Alaska operations at Wednesday's Kenai Chamber of Commerce luncheon. He said Unocal monitors its discharges. Results are then reported to the EPA, he said.

Susan Saupe, director of science and research for Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, said her organization has conducted studies on and off for 11 years looking at the impacts of the discharges.

CIRCAC is a federally mandated organization charged with representing citizens in areas and interest groups who potentially could be impacted by oil industry operations.

Its studies looked at hydrocarbons — molecules found in most oil byproducts — in animal tissue and sediment upstream, near platforms and downstream of platforms. So far, hydrocarbons from the platform discharges found in Cook Inlet have been shown to have no direct environmental impact, Saupe said. CIRCAC has spent a lot of time trying to pinpoint various sources of hydrocarbons in the inlet, she said. There are many, and CIRCAC is working to identify them, she said.

"I am providing what I believe is unbiased scientific information," Saupe said. "(Our organization) is not providing this information to promote one particular side."

At Zager's chamber presentation, he stressed the importance of Unocal's operations to the area's economy and said it is important that the public provide input to the EPA during the repermitting process.

There are 16 platforms in Cook Inlet, and 15 are affected by the permit. Ten are owned by Unocal. ConocoPhillips, Marathon and XTO Energy are the other companies affected.

Unocal employs 300 Alaskans, 200 in the Kenai area. In 2003, Unocal spent \$177 million in salaries and wages and with other businesses and \$42 million in state taxes and royalties, according to company sources.

About 85 percent of the crude oil in the inlet comes from offshore platforms with about a quarter of the deliverable natural gas in the region coming from the same source.

Zager said more stringent permit terms could drive up Unocal's operating costs, making it more difficult to turn a profit. Depending on the scope of new restrictions, the company would evaluate the future profitability of their platforms in extreme circumstances, he said.

Norman, the Port Graham village chief, said his community is concerned various studies do not reflect the impact of the discharges. He said in 1997, an EPA study found there were high levels of contamination in the village's fish. This correlated to the contaminants contained in some of the materials coming off of the platforms, he said.

"We go from wonderful — no need for concern when we are harvesting — to (discovering) high levels of contaminants," Norman said.

Saupe, with CIRCAC, said that EPA study raised more questions than it answered. It showed metals in some of the fish that also can be found in the produced water discharged from the platforms. Those metals also can be found in many natural sources in the inlet.

Pinpointing a source of the contamination was not part of the study, she said, making it difficult to correlate the contamination in the fish and the platforms. She said further studies will continually address whether these discharges affect the environment.

Gold said it has not been proven that the discharges negatively impact the environment. But no studies have examined if existing contamination in the inlet and the discharges are directly correlated, she said. There currently are no plans to conduct this type of study, she said.

Materials being dumped from the platforms put "tens of thousands" of toxic chemicals into the inlet every year, said Lois Epstein, an engineer for environmental protection advocacy group Cook Inlet Keeper. The area directly around the platforms have not been examined, she said. Organisms close to the platform could be impacted as well as the salmon that pass by it, potentially effecting the fish, she said.

Also, if people perceive the inlet to be contaminated, it could have a negative effect on the market for the fish coming out of it, she said.

Epstein said her group is working with the EPA to establish new criteria for the permit. She said she believes the offshore producers can ship their solid material to on-shore facilities in the inlet for disposal and inject the produced water into the ground so it does not contaminate the water.

Guidelines for the permit are decided by the EPA based on market factors and technological advances, Epstein said. Given the high prices of oil and gas combined

with new technology, she said she believes it is reasonable to prohibit discharges into the inlet.

Norman said his village is lobbying for zero discharges from the platforms.

"(For) our people, using subsistence resources has been a lifelong effort," he said.