

# Anchorage Daily News (AK)

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## **Buyout for fishermen is possible**

**SEINERS: Trimming fleet might lead to bigger catches, higher payoff.**

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Southeast Alaska seine-boat salmon fishermen might buy out some of their ranks and trim the size of the fleet using money Congress approved last week.

"This is a huge deal for my guys," said Bob Thorstenson Jr., a Juneau seiner who is helping organize the buyout.

Congress last week approved a \$25 million federal loan as part of its renewal of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the nation's foremost ocean fisheries law.

President Bush is expected to sign the bill, named in part for U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska. Stevens co-sponsored the fishery legislation.

Trevor McCabe, an Anchorage attorney and former fisheries aide to Stevens, worked as a lobbyist seeking the buyout, said Rob Zuanich, who represents seiner trade associations.

Like much of Alaska's commercial salmon industry, the Southeast seiners have struggled in recent years against low prices caused by competition from farm-raised salmon. The fishermen, who use a net called a purse seine to surround and scoop up fish, also have suffered from a self-inflicted wound -- their own huge hauls of pink salmon, causing a glut of canned pinks in warehouses.

The idea behind the buyout is that fewer boats in the fishery might lead to bigger catches and higher payoffs for the seiners who remain, supporters say.

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The Southeast seine fleet now numbers 415 permit holders, but only about 250 of them are currently active, Zuanich said.

Under language in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the seiners must hold an election to see if they want to go with a buyout and repay the loan over 40 years with a tax of up to 3 percent of the dockside value of their catches.

The buyout vote could happen as soon as late spring, Zuanich said. The hope is that as much as 40 percent of the fleet can be bought out, he said.

Only permits would be retired; fishermen could retain their boats for use in other fisheries such as halibut or crab, Zuanich said.

Buyouts of fishing permits or vessels have happened before in Alaska.

In 1998, the government financed a \$90 million buyout of nine foreign-owned trawl ships in the Bering Sea pollock fishery, and in 2004 Bering Sea crab fishermen voted to shoulder a \$97 million loan to buy out 25 boats.

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