

CSAW
Campaign to Safeguard America's Waters



Earth Island Institute



Responsible Cruising in Alaska

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Alaska Legislature Upholds Cruise Ship Initiative – Protects Alaska's Water Quality

CSAW and RCA, with the help of Prince William Soundkeeper, the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, the Alaska Trollers Association, and Cordova District Fishermen United defeated another attempt by the foreign-owned cruise ship industry to overturn a key water quality protection measure passed by Alaska voter initiative in 2006.

A fleet of cruise ship lobbyists campaigned non-stop for a year to strike Alaska's "mixing zone" ban for cruise ship discharges from State statute. The industry hosted numerous free lunch/infomercials on ships during the 2008 season, ran ads in all media outlets, donated heavily during the last election campaign, predicted economic hardship for Alaska's ports, and overwhelmed legislative staff to try and bulldoze through a reversal of the existing pollution rules. The industry's argument focused on two points: (1) the standards were impossible to meet and technologies to meet them didn't exist, and (2) the mixing zone loophole (pollution-dilution areas in public waters,) which represents the lowest common denominator of performance, should be authorized for cruise ships because in the past other dischargers have been given mixing zones to allow circumvention of the Alaska Water Quality Standards (WQS.)

In February, DEC hosted a technology conference at which wastewater treatment system suppliers and scientists testified that technologies to meet the WQS do in fact exist, although some systems would need to be reconfigured to fit on the ships. In March, DEC released a report on sampling results from the 2008 season documenting even the toughest standards for copper and ammonia were already being met about 1/3 of the time.

The bill passed by the Legislature affirms that the industry will be expected to meet the WQS at the point of discharge. Ships can apply for temporary waivers, but they must demonstrate they will at minimum match the performance achieved by ships using the best available technologies. According to CSAW Director Gershon Cohen this was a victory on multiple fronts: "By keeping the law intact the Alaska Legislature demonstrated facts and independent expert testimony can and should defeat myths and propaganda. Increasing the loading of pollutants into our oceans will only lead to the same catastrophic circumstances we now face after having used our atmosphere as a mixing zone for decades...Alaska law now requires the worst ships to meet the performance of the best ships."

RCA President Chip Thoma agreed: "The 2006 initiative, the will of Alaska voters, was respected and upheld. There is now a set timeline for full implementation of the strict "point of discharge" limits, the cruise laws remain intact, and large ships must make good faith efforts to comply. This Legislature made a reasoned and fair decision, by giving the ships a few added years to minimize their metal and ammonia discharges. The new "sunset clause" will give full incentive to cruise ships to make progress in decreasing wastewater pollution."

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