



## **OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO ECONOMIC AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT**

### **Opinion Research Sponsored by The Salmon Project**

As part of a feasibility study in early 2013, the Salmon Project sponsored extensive opinion research among Alaskans to learn about our connections to wild salmon, our perceptions of the benefits of the resource and the threats it faces, and our interest in supporting efforts to raise awareness and increase connectedness. DHM Research, an independent firm, conducted 11 focus groups, 35 opinion leader interviews, and a scientific telephone and online survey of more than 2,000 Alaskans in five regions of the state—North, Rivers & Interior, Southwest, Cook Inlet, and Prince William Sound/Southeast.

The research results—including a general overview, regional highlights, and several subgroup and special interest memos—are available at [www.salmonproject.org/research](http://www.salmonproject.org/research). This document presents observations and conclusions relating especially to those involved in economic and resource development issues, and assumes general familiarity with the survey and related qualitative studies. To put this memo in context, please refer to the more comprehensive description of the research and its results available at the above link.

### **Competing Interests Demand Fairness, Rational Discourse, and Balance**

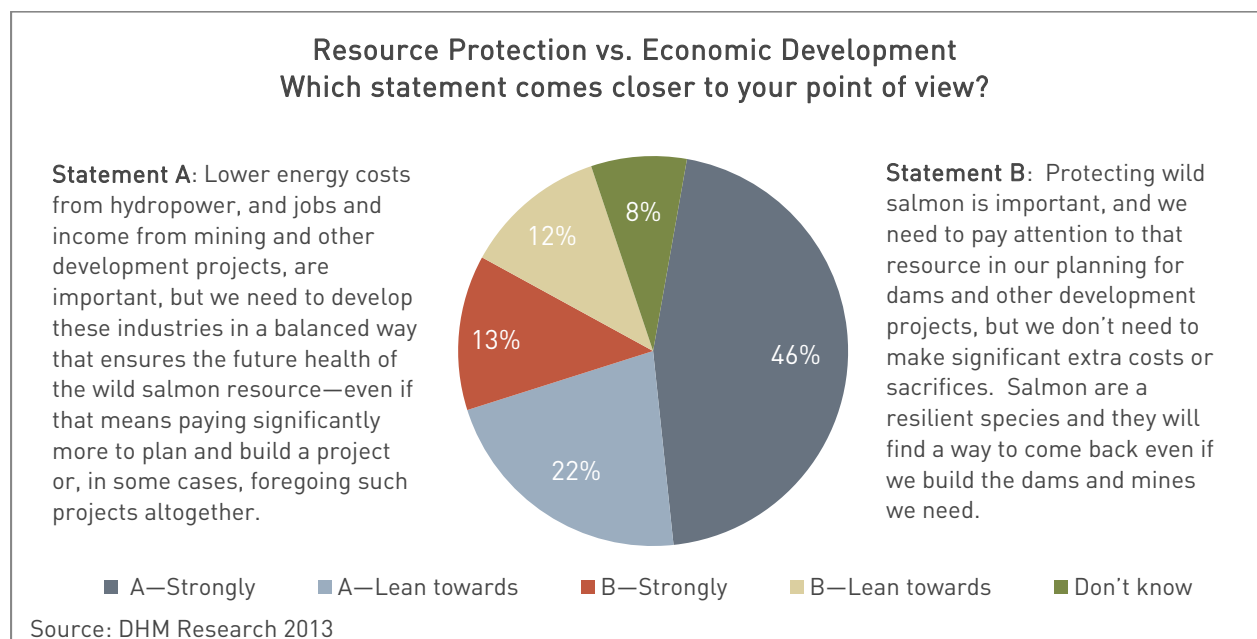
The Salmon Project's opinion research provides a wealth of useful material for individuals and organizations involved in resource and economic development issues. With debate around Pebble Mine continuing in the background during the time of our studies, development was a hot topic in all aspects of the research, with focus group participants, opinion leaders, and survey respondents all contributing to the dialogue.

The major takeaway was a widespread desire for fairness, rationality, and balance. Research participants endorsed the need for diversification of the Alaskan economy, a stronger revenue base, more jobs, cheaper energy, and a host of other benefits brought by economic development. But Alaskans of all stripes—including people who identify themselves as political and economic conservatives—are also very deeply attached to wild salmon for nutritional, cultural, recreational, environmental, and symbolic reasons. Wild salmon touch the lives of

Alaskans in deep and numerous ways that emerged throughout the research. Few people expressed willingness to put this iconic Alaskan resource at risk.

### The Balancing Act

The most direct reflection of Alaskan views about the balance of economic development and resource protection came from the survey question that asked respondents to indicate which of two statements they preferred. Both statements recognized the value of protecting wild salmon and the benefits to jobs, income, and energy costs brought by large-scale economic development such as hydropower projects and mining. But Statement A privileged a development balance that “ensures the future health of the wild salmon resource—even if that means paying significantly more to plan and build a project or, in some cases, foregoing such projects altogether,” while Statement B privileged a balance that pays attention to the wild salmon resource in project planning but does not “make significant extra costs or sacrifices.” Given these alternatives respondents opted firmly for Statement A (see figure).



The economic development vs. resource protection issue generated compelling differences by region. In Prince William Sound/Southeast and the Southwest, half the population endorsed a strong A position (50% and 52% respectively), with overall support for Statement A at 73% and 75%. In those regions only one in ten opted strongly for Statement B. Strong A response in the other regions ranged from 42% to 45%, with overall support for A at 57% in the North, 64% in Rivers & Interior, and 68% in Cook Inlet. In the North, where the research found more sensitivity to economic needs, soft support for Statement A was weaker than in other areas and strong support for Statement B was highest at 19%. Overall support for Statement B was also

highest there at 32%, followed closely by 30% in Rivers & Interior. Other regions reported totals for B of 19% (Prince William Sound/Southeast), 20% (Southwest), and 25% (Cook Inlet).

Support for Statement A significantly outweighed support for Statement B among all political groups, but predictable differences to the development vs. protection issue did arise based on political and economic views. Strong A response progressed downward along the scale of liberalism by political party (Democrats 60% > political “Others” 48% > Republicans 37%) and by economic views (liberals 64% > moderates 47% > conservatives 35%). But even so, strong A response outweighed strong B response by a nearly two-to-one ratio in conservative groups (37% vs. 19% among Republicans and 35% vs. 18% among economic conservatives). The strong A vs. strong B margin in liberal groups was much higher: more than 6-to-1 among self-identified Democrats and economic liberals, and nearly 5-to-1 among political “Others” and economic moderates. Turning to combined strong and soft support for the two statements, we find that Republicans favored A over B by 58% to 38%, with similar numbers among economic conservatives. Democrats favored A over B by 76% to 22%, and political “Others” by 71% to 20%.

### Perception of Threats to Wild Salmon from Development

Another direct reflection of attitudes about development came from the series of survey questions that asked respondents to rate 14 threats to wild salmon on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 = not a threat, 3 = neutral, and 5 = big threat. The list of threats in the survey instrument were based on concerns that arose from the preceding series of focus groups, and three of the 14 threats related directly to development issues. These were: *Disruption and/or pollution of habitat due to: (i) large-scale development projects such as dams or mines; (ii) activity such as building and road construction and neighborhood development, and (iii) agriculture and timber harvest.* In the survey, Alaskans rated disruption due to large-scale projects as the biggest of the three development-related threats (mean score of 3.9) and the third biggest threat overall after *Illegal high seas fishing* and *Overfishing by commercial operations* (both 4.0). By contrast, disruption of habitat in the two other ways tested ranked relatively low among threats (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> overall), each with mean scores of 3.3. Only threats from hatchery fish and overfishing by sport, personal use, and subsistence fishermen ranked lower.

Here again we found differences by region and by political and economic views. Regionally, disruption by large-scale projects was the big issue; there were no statistically significant differences in connection with the other two forms of habitat disruption. On dams and mines, though, the Southwest stood out from other regions in seeing such disruption as a big threat (mean score 4.3 compared to 4.0 in the North and 3.9 elsewhere). In percentage terms, 63% of respondents in the Southwest saw disruption from large-scale projects as a “big threat”—the highest response from any region to any of the threats. The North was not far behind with 50% rating habitat disruption due to large-scale projects as a big threat.

Turning to political and economic views we find that Democrats and political “Others” turned in higher mean ratings on all three of the habitat disruption items than Republicans did; economic liberals turned in higher ratings than conservatives; and, within the conservative group, those who identified themselves as “somewhat conservative” on economic issues had significantly higher ratings than the “very conservative.” Taking the issues one by one based on mean scores:

- Disruption and/or pollution of habitat due to large-scale development of projects such as dams or mines (3.9 statewide):
  - Democrats and Others (4.1 and 3.9) > Republicans (3.6)
  - Economic liberals (4.3) > Moderates (4.0) > Conservatives (3.6)
    - “Very” and “somewhat” liberal (each 4.3) > “Somewhat” conservative (3.8) > “Very” conservative (3.3)
- Disruption and/or pollution of habitat due to activity such as building and road construction and neighborhood development (3.3 statewide):
  - Democrats (3.7) > Others (3.3) > Republicans (3.0)
  - Economic liberals and moderates (3.7 and 3.4) > Conservatives (3.1)
    - “Very” and “somewhat” liberal (3.5 and 3.7) > “Somewhat” conservative (3.2) > “Very” conservative (2.8)
- Disruption and/or pollution of habitat due to agriculture and timber harvest (3.3 statewide):
  - Democrats (3.6) > Others and Republicans (3.2 and 3.1)
  - Economic liberals and moderates (3.6 and 3.4) > Conservatives (3.1)
    - “Very” and “somewhat” liberal (each 3.6) > “Somewhat” conservative (3.2) > “Very” conservative (2.8)

### **Suggestions for Development-Related Communications**

We heard a lot about Pebble Mine in the focus groups, interviews, and in response to open-ended survey questions. Some supported the mine, and more opposed it—often in strong and colorful terms. But there was a common message underlying both positions: people want factual information that will help them truly understand issues and reach intelligent decisions. They want a public discussion based on reliable information that takes into consideration the full range of interests, pro and con, and the full range of possible outcomes under different development scenarios. They want a decision-making process that they perceive as fair and not determined by money or manipulation of the facts. And, finally, they want both wild salmon and economic opportunity in their future and the future of their children and grandchildren. The Salmon Project research suggests that developers who keep these values in mind, do their best to live up to them, and craft a thoughtful and inclusive communications program stand the best chance of winning public approval.